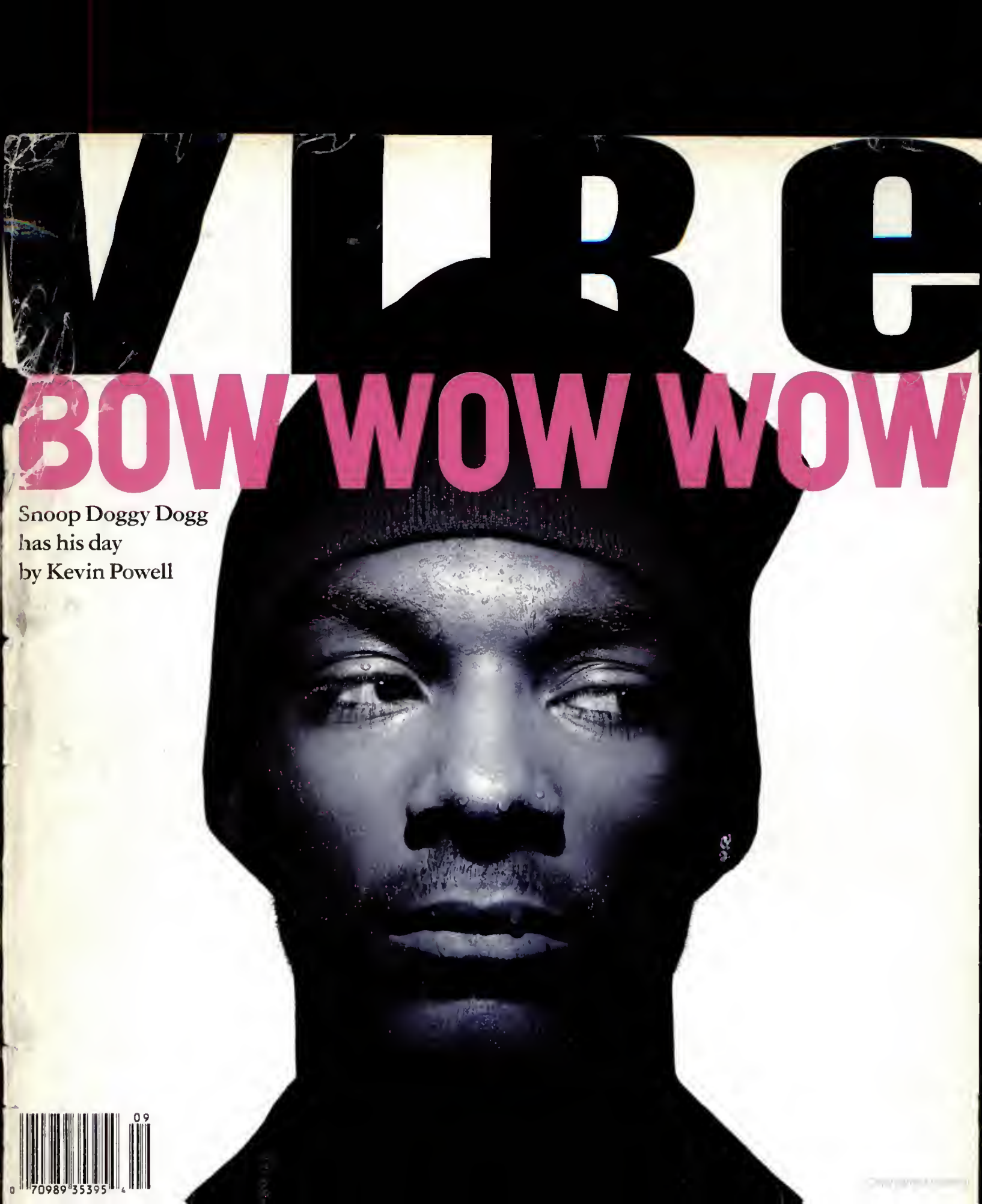
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by Kevin Powell



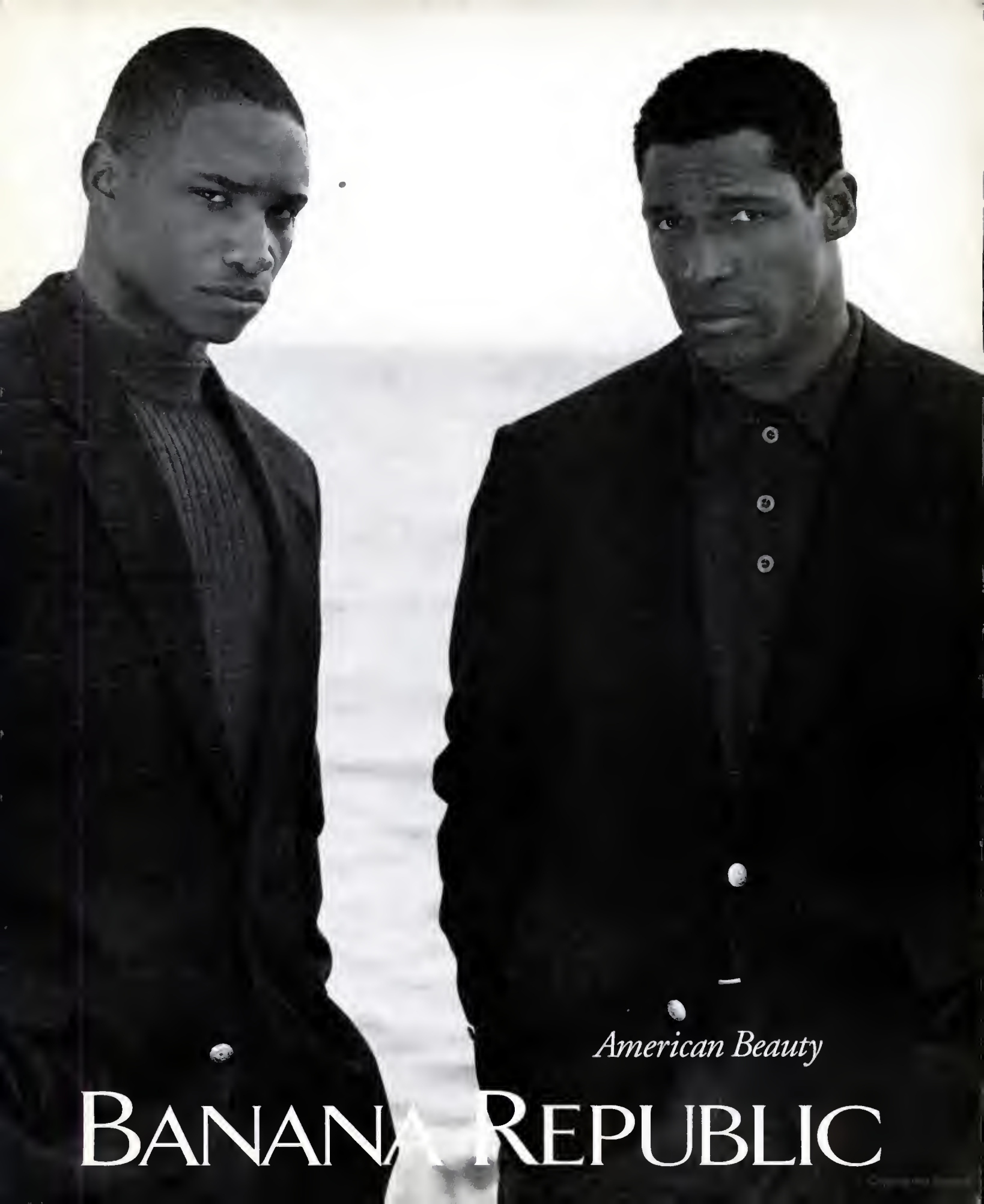
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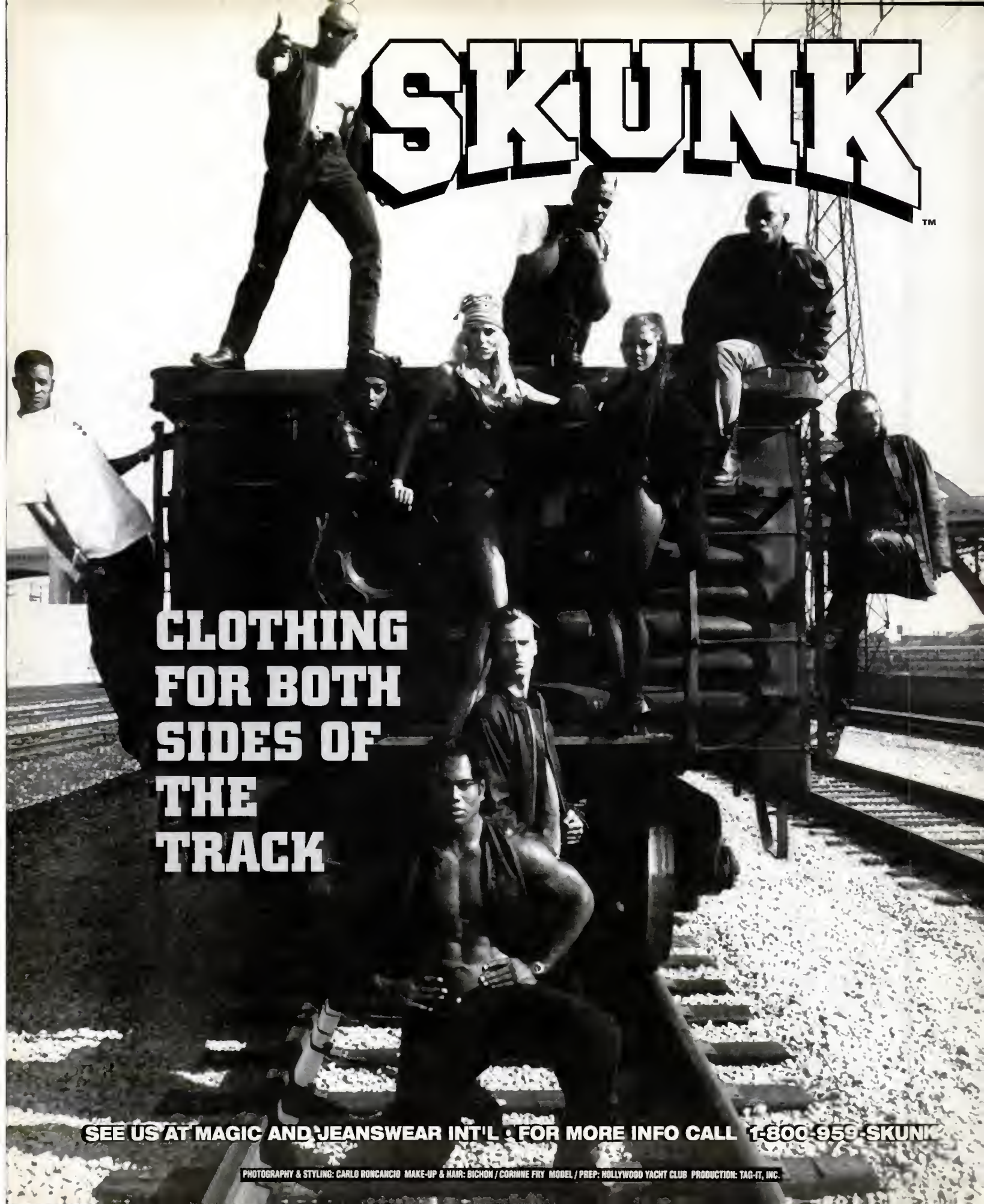


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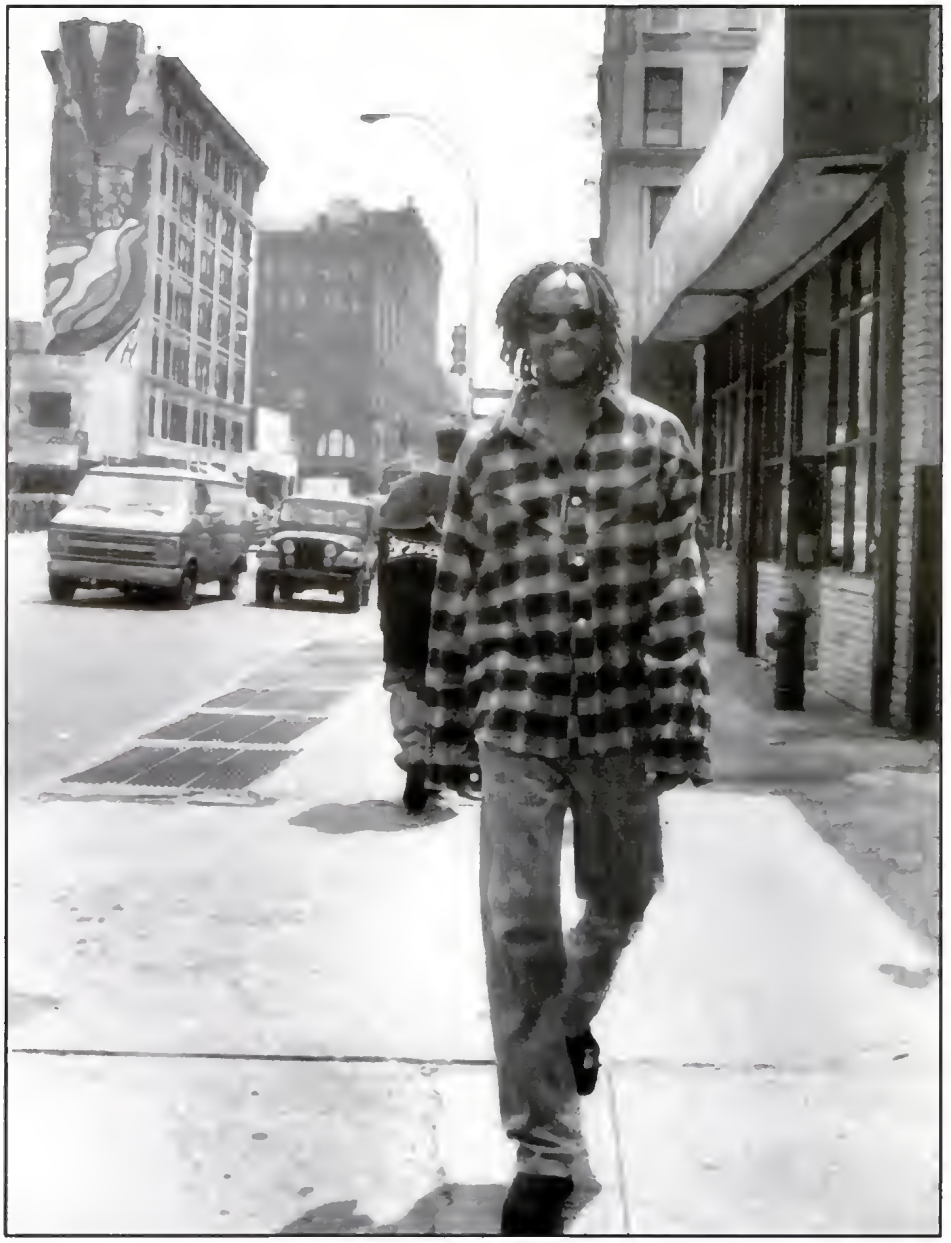
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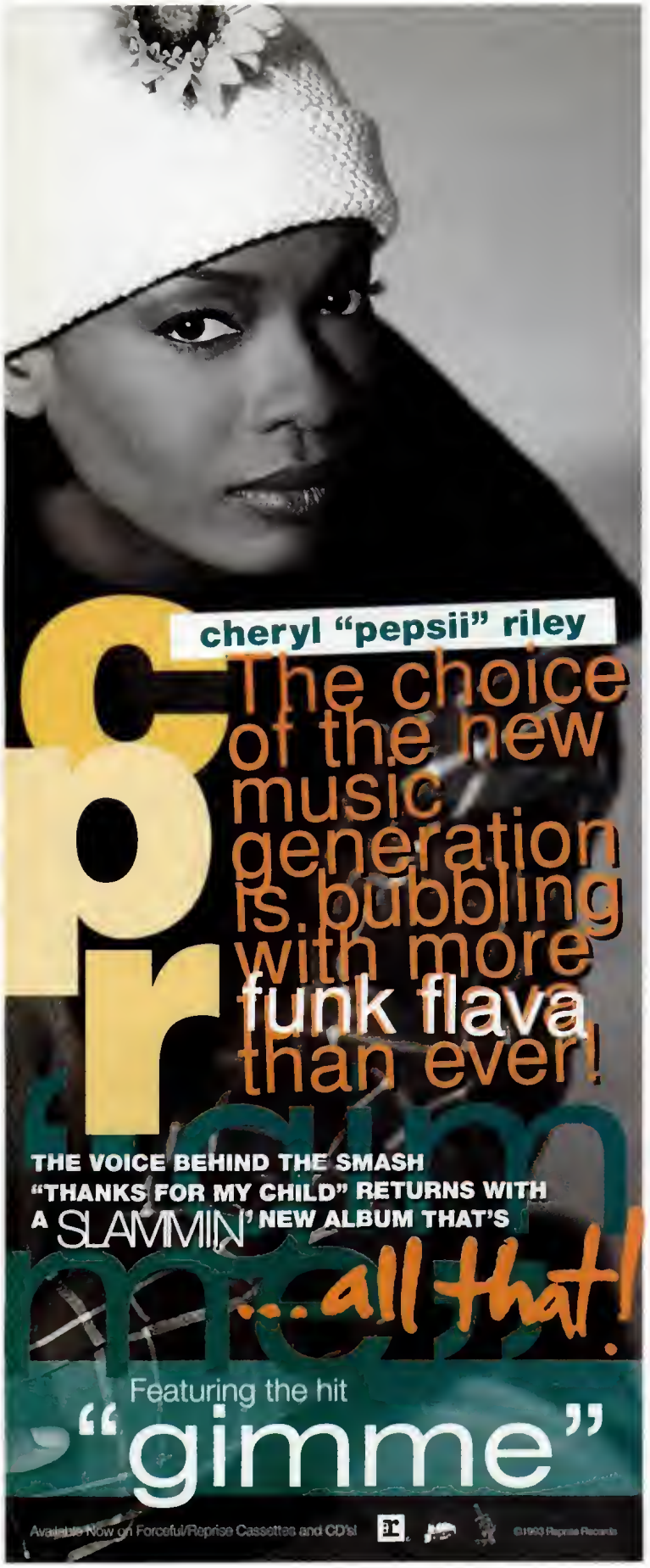
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Ruven Afanador

Fashion photographer Ruven Afanador was always attracted to the glamorous women in the South American circuses he frequented as a child with his father. Photographing the Byron Lars story (page 52) fulfilled one of his lifelong dreams. "I've always wanted to do a shoot with a circus theme," says the Colombian native, "so I could incorporate my childhood memories." Working for *Town and Country*, *Mirabella*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, and Mexican *Vogue*, Afanador has developed a decidedly bizarre sense of style and beauty. "I've wanted to work with this type of look for a while," he says, "but most magazines aren't into shooting unusual girls."

Greg Tate

Greg Tate, whose Byron Lars interview and short fiction appear in this issue, first became interested in music and writing when he read *Black Music* by LeRoi Jones. After several years as a jazz (and cultural and political and literary and intellectual) critic at *The Village Voice*, Tate published a collection of essays, *Flyboy in the Butter-milk*, last year. His work has also appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Spin*, *Downbeat*, and *Musician*.

Working on the Byron Lars story (page 52) allowed Tate to reveal his many selves. Most recently he has written a play, *My Darling Gremlin*, and *Fresh Faust*, a libretto for a jazz/hip hop opera opening in Boston in December. His funk-rock band Women in Love released its first album, *Yo Wassup Witcha Skinhead Muhfukuh*, this month. Greg, how do you do it? "I'm a hopeless insomniac."

Elena Oumano

"I was happy to bring to light the voices we don't hear from in Jamaica," says Bronx-born Elena Oumano of "Daughters of the Dance" (page 78). "A lot of women I interviewed talked about how hard it is getting through the male-dominated world of reggae as single mothers, countering male competition, and facing jealous boyfriends."

A single mother herself, Oumano is a college professor, has contributed to *L.A. Weekly*, *The L.A. Times*, *The Village Voice*, and is currently working on her eighth book. Part Jewish, North African, Russian, and Turkish, Oumano, who's spent much time in Jamaica, says she appreciates the country's motto: "Out of Many We Are One."

Hilton Als

"It was interesting to express an extremely visual person in language," says *Vibe*'s editor-at-large Hilton Als of his story on Baltimore's dance-music diva Ultra Naté (page 66). Als's interest in the visual was also the inspiration for the "We Real Cool" fashion spread (page 96). The Brooklyn-born Als, who is of West Indian descent, has been a staff writer at *The Village Voice* and contributor to *The Nation*, *The New Yorker*, and *Artforum*. He likes finding talent that slips through the cracks of both white and black mainstream publications. His talent for combining images with words led to his collaboration with visual artist Darryl Turner on installations at the New Museum in New York and the NGBK in Berlin. He also contributed to the screenplay for Tom Kalin's *Swoon* and is currently working on a book on democracy in America for Farrar, Straus and Giroux.



Christian Wright

"My mother was somewhat of a hippie, my father was pretty straight-laced, and between them I received a great musical education as a child, from Bob Dylan to Leonard Cohen," says Christian Wright, 29, who wrote about the pop soul trio SWV (page 94). "Taj is sweet, you can imagine her as your friend; Coco is the diva, and Lee Anne is at once giggly and very tough," Christian says of the group. "In talking to them, I realized how passively involved they are. There's something disconcerting about women being the pawns of male producers," she says. "They're like Play-Doh in men's hands." Christian is a senior writer at *Allure* and contributes frequently to *Rolling Stone* and *Details*.

Melodie McDaniel

"I wanted to be a photographer so I could travel to exotic places," says L.A. native Melodie McDaniel, 26, "and now when I shoot, I imagine that I'm in these places and create that situation." "We Real Cool" (page 96) was Melodie's first foray into fashion photography, allowing her to use her "fake documentary" style to create a timeless piece meshing the '90s with the '50s. Lately, Melodie has been wrapped up in shooting album covers and music videos, including Porno for Pyros' single "Cursed Female." Melodie's photos have appeared in *Interview*, *The Face*, *Vanity Fair* and *Rolling Stone*, as well as on album covers for Ziggy Marley, Suzanne Vega, and the upcoming Grace Jones record.


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WE RECEIVED HUNDREDS OF LETTERS IN RESPONSE TO THE FALL 1992 PREVIEW ISSUE OF *VIBE*. HERE ARE A FEW OF THE MOST INTERESTING. WE'LL RUN MORE NEXT MONTH. KEEP THE LETTERS COMING.

MAIL

You wanted to know how you sound. Well, I think your new mag will be around for a long time. Here are my opinions on your first issue:

(1) It would be nice to have a gossip column where we could get the lowdown on everybody. The one you guys attempted, "*Read*, Miss Honey," was mad corny. I could get more dirt than that on St. Peter. (2) Kim France's article "Dis, Miss!" about female rappers dissing each other in little cat fights, was the best article in the mag. (Dear Shanté, About your album *Big Meme*: When a rapper makes a whole album just for other rappers, the audience [remember us?] doesn't buy it. Just ask Kool Moe Dee.) (3) I was so surprised to see a picture of Janis Joplin. I am a 21-year-old round-the-way girl who was in the closet about Joplin's music. Since I saw her in *Vibe* I can now come out. Thank you.



(4) Kristine McKenna's L.L. Cool J interview was great ["Hip Hop Hollywood: The Star"]. Her questions were straight and to the point. It's a shame L.L. had to lie on every one of them. (5) A question to Ricky Lee, who wrote the article about Naomi Campbell ["An Inconvenient Woman"]: What the hell were you talking about? (6) Albert Watson: props! EVETTE D. PERKINS, BROOKLYN

What impressed me the most about the first issue of *Vibe* is what seems to be a strong feminist/womanist presence in the articles and philosophies of your writers. I sincerely hope that your magazine makes a strong commitment to criticizing blatantly sexist lyrics and destructive images of male violence in the hip hop industry.

As I grow older and increasingly adopt feminist principles, it's frustrating to find that the male-dominated music I've made a large part of my life is contrary to the ideals of equality and unity that it claims to be fighting for. Now it seems I can no longer tolerate the bitch/ho/golddigger/skeezer lyrics that so many rappers use.

There are many young women out there, like myself, whose values and beliefs are greatly influenced by hip hop. I hope that, unlike other mags, *Vibe* will make a concerted effort to address equally the views and concerns of B-boys and B-girls alike. R.J. HAINES, MONTREAL, QUEBEC

You are to be commended on your preview publication, there is much heart in what *Vibe* promises to become. Except Bönz Malone's "Misda Manners" column. Brother Manners, do take some journalistic responsibility. Some youth might think you're implying that to "boost the flyest shit out of the store" is OK. Aren't the statistics of our black brothers in jail high enough? My brother, when you have such a wonderful opportunity to speak to so many people, be careful what you say, someone might be listening. R OWINGS, NEW YORK CITY

L.L. Cool J made some outregeous comments in his interview with Kristine McKenna. According to L.L., "Everybody knows that black women are less subject to racism than black men." As proof L.L. cites that "the corporate ladder is filled with black women and white men and women." Meanwhile, black men have "people slamming the door" in their faces.

Please! Just as many doors, if not more, are slammed in black women's faces. If it's not because we're black, then it's because we're women. Sexism combined with racism keeps most black women concentrated on the lower rungs of the corporate ladder doing clerical, entry-level work. Those black women higher up find it difficult to deal with the boys'-club atmosphere that blocks them from obtaining positions of real power. Being black is hard, but white America still places a lot of value on being male. Ask black filmmaker Julie Dash if she can get the kind of money and studio backing that Spike Lee, John Singleton, or the Hudlin brothers get.

Worst of all, we have to fight sexism from our own. How many times have black men referred to us as nothing but bitches and hoes? Rappers are especially at fault in this respect. Before L.L. decides to talk about what "everybody knows" again, he should ask more of everybody. CRYSTAL MARIE SMITH, NEW HAVEN

Kevin Powell's "Native Sons" was the most real and heart-touching story I've ever read. Being from Birmingham, Alabama, and being raised by both parents, I haven't been subjected to homelessness or any of the things that Treach has. Yet. I'm very glad to say that Powell's article opened my eyes to never judge a brother by his cover. Right now my father is dead, my mom is incapable of taking care of herself, and the rest of my family ignores me and doesn't help me. So I know how it feels to be abandoned and alone. To Naughty by Nature, Kevin Powell, and every other black male/female making their dream a reality, I love you and I pray to God you stay on top and never the bottom. TINA TAYLOR, BIRMINGHAM

I didn't like "It's Deep" by Michael Small [Book column] because it was extremely stereotyped. It talks about black people getting hype on the beach and all that white people get is skin cancer. I am white and lived in South Central L.A., until last week. I've been through hell and back. I've gotten shit all over the place just because I'm white. I've had some guy at a restaurant tell my boyfriend (who is black) that he could come in and eat but I couldn't, all because I'm white. I was one of three whites in a Latino gang. When we'd get jumped I would be jumped first and the hardest. It's not all that "great" being white. I'm not saying blacks don't have it hard, I know they do, I'm just saying don't be so quick to judge all white people. If we want things to change, that's not the way to go. AMY TENANT, SEATTLE

For the benefit of your demographics data base let me state that I am a third-generation Hawaiian-born Japanese-American reggae musician.

James Ledbetter's "Imitation of Life" is an interesting read for someone like me, a member of a minuscule American minority that is neither white nor black. I wonder what Ledbetter would think of a Hawaiian or Tongan or Fijian reggae band? I know this may seem odd to many, but ever since Bob Marley passed through the Pacific, reggae music has been a very big thing. Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders instantly related to Marley's vibe and embraced his music like a long-lost brother.

A local (white) record reviewer dissed the reggae album *Kanakafari* by the Hawaiian band Ho'aikane, calling it "cultural plagiarism" and accusing the band of abandoning their Hawaiian roots and being influenced by a "foreign" culture. I told him that he would have been more comfortable if the album had taken its influence from a European form of Christianity rather than an African one. I wrote that feeling a kinship with Africa was no more a "foreign" influence than the English language that we are all taught in school. Am I (politically or logically) wrong about this?

I would guess that Ledbetter may feel more sympathetic toward Pacific people who feel kinship toward African culture than white people who try to cash in on it. But should all white musicians face exile into the country & western bin? Although many white people live in the smug insulation of their privileged status, many are willing to venture out. Why discourage that?

And finally, what about folks like me? Will I be adjudged deluded and insane, or perhaps just another exploitive cultural pirate? Is there a place in this world for a "Japanee [sic] boy from Hawaii" who surrendered to reggae's calling? R.DOUG MATSUOKA, HONOLULU



DRIVEBY SHOOTING BROOKLYN, NEW YORK ALICE ARNOLD



I had a lot of problems with James Ledbetter's article: One was the repetition of the phrase "white Negro." According to Ledbetter, this refers to a white person who listens to black music, dresses in baggy gear, and walks with a swagger. The only purpose this statement serves is to enforce the stereotype that all black people fit this description.

The other was that Ledbetter says that by listening to rap, the white person is "trying to...correct their own...sterile, oppressive culture." The reason why whites get involved is much less complicated. The simple truth is that when music is as innovative, influential, and important as rap is, it is inevitable that it will spread to other sections of society.

The questions we need to ask ourselves is, when are we going to start looking at one another as human beings? Since so many people in the world have views as ignorant as Ledbetter's, I say probably never. But I see hip hop as the art form that, as of right now, has the best chance of closing the gap. We have to take advantage of that. M.W., ELLICOT CITY, MD

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How come your magazine doesn't talk about all the Latinos, Asians, Samoans, Indians, and others who listen to rap? Why do you just concentrate on telling black people that whites are the only ones listening to rap?

Also, you say that white youths listen to rap to rebel against their own oppressive, sterile culture. I don't suppose you ever heard of heavy metal? Heavy metal has been rebelling against the establishment before rap even existed. MILAN SIKELA, SAN FRANCISCO

Thank you. You have finally given me a way to check out the black scene without being embarrassed, feared as a racist, or dumb. The writing in your magazine not only appealed to the fat-beat, fat-bass line, crazy-fat-lyric lover in me, but the college graduate (Morgan State University) in me was totally inspired as well. Case in point, Kevin Powell's article used words like "nigga" and "ghetto bastard" along with words like "hyperbole." Any hip hop fan with a sense of style, from the uppity negroes to the real niggas, will love and support this magazine. JOE CLAIR, LANDOVER

In a society where there is such a division between blacks and whites your article only makes things worse by promoting the differences between the groups. SCOTT HULL, SUDBURY, MA

I was drawn to black culture in the late 1960s, not because of stereotypical images of flamboyant, high-living party people but because to me black people offered a vision of strength, community, and genuine love and commitment so markedly absent in the white community. DOUGLAS WEAVER, OAKLAND

It navar caasas to amaza me that aithough blacks always cry about baing discriminatad against they do a good job of encouraging it. You take a few quotas from paopia who ara famous because of hard work and turn it against every white person who iistens to rap music. DEREK BALL, FAYETTEVILLE, NC

Do you honestly want to know why some white people turn to black culture? As Sinéad O'Connor observed, only the blacks in America have culture. Personally, I think black people are beautiful, talented, and sexy. This is not said as often as it should be. Maybe because the white man who pushes all the buttons has envy in his eyes. JACQUELINE, SEATTLE


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START

Edited by Rob Kenner

NIGGA

Just a Word *By Scott Poulson-Bryant*

It goes a little something like this: "That's a *fine* nigga" or "nigga *please*" or "that's my *nigga*." In the heightened elegance of black folks' talk, the ugliest words can make the most beautiful sounds. Like nigga. Somebody's uncle can say that word with a gap-toothed grin and a blackman bop—"nigga, you *must* be crazy"—and everybody'll fall out laughing. But I can't even write the word. I write it "nigga"—take away the "er," give it an "a," and maybe the power is gone, but the sound is still there. James Baldwin can write it, but that might be just because he's Baldwin and he heard the word shouted at him, to him, with all the venom and cowardice that the word holds.

I've heard about the word, but I've only heard black folks use it. Not to demean, as they say, but to endear. The reclamation argument in effect: If black folks use it, the power is diminished, the fangs are extracted, the claws are shorn away; if black folks use it, white folks will see that it just don't hurt us, that it's just a word and sticks and stones and all that....But what happens when cultural heroes call themselves "nigga"? What happens when Joe Whiteboy listens to 2 Pac's "Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z" and decides, Hey, that nigga-word is kinda groovy...and it may not mean anything because these guys call themselves niggas openly, proudly...so can't I use it too?

It's just a word, albeit a word carrying the ugly burden of this bruised and weary nation. Just a word, like any other word, right? You can hear any non-African racist invest words like "negro" or "black" or "colored" or any of the once proper terms with the same kind of venom and cowardice. Try it: Put a "The" before "Blacks," or "Problem" after "Negro." It all sounds the same to me. But somehow it all comes back to nigga.

How, you ask yourself, a mere 30 years after Dr. King led the March on Washington, can there be a pop group called Niggaz With Attitude? The glorification of "ackin' like niggas" as the road to the liberation of black folks? I think not. The reclamation argument in effect: If we call ourselves niggas, we recontextualize it, take it away from white people. Wrong. What we do is sell it to white people, sell them the uncomplicated use of the word, because—"ackin' like niggas"—we've lost our way in the minefield of cultural identification.

"You can only be destroyed by believing that you are what the white world calls a *nigger*. I tell you this because I love you, and please don't you ever forget it." James Baldwin wrote those words to his nephew in *The Fire Next Time* on the hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation, the same year as that March on Washington. Here it is, the 130th anniversary of the Emancipation, and some of our cultural heroes are beginning to sort out the morass that sprouts up around the word "nigga." In "I Ain't the Nigga," the Coup are telling us that "Nigga hasn't always meant a man with melanin/it used to be a piece of wood that sat on the cotton gin." Umar Bin Hassan of the Last Poets has revived "Niggers Are Scared of Revolution," a Last Poets track used in the '72 documentary on Malcolm X, for John Singleton's *Poetic Justice*. Public Enemy and KRS-One continue their vehement denouncement of the word.

And they're all speaking to black folks when they do it.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARIO CASTELLANOS

411

By Carol Cooper

BLACK HISTORY—It's been seven years since the original Disco Fever was padlocked...right after the rap movie Krush Groove shot its final scenes at this Bronx hip hop landmark. I remember the old Fever as just a five-minute drive from the crib—a glorified uptown bar with DJ booth, makeshift stage, and more character than any 10 posh Manhattan trend-dens. For almost a decade Disco Fever was the only place where hip hop stars and fans mingled on an informal basis. Run with uncommon style by Sal Abbatiello (the blackest Italian boy in show business), Disco Fever was further distinguished from other clubs by the way it treated employees and patrons like family, which is probably why the violence common in other rap venues seldom surfaced at Sal's place.

The Fever (relocated to 396 E. Tremont) is a lot bigger than it looks. You get a brief, civilized pat-down before eeling your way down a narrow stairway to the main room. Tonight, Positive K, Melle Mel, Onyx, and Big Daddy Kane are here in person, while Pete Rock, Eric B., and Queen Latifah look on from posters on the walls. A sea of heads bobs to the beat: hoodies, caps, kerchiefs, Kangols, turbans, dreads, and baldies. Small posses of tough, sexy females—school girls mostly—stand, dance, and cruise in roving prides from the dance floor to the central bar to the red velvet banquettes. Execs from Polygram and Def Jam move and mingle at a slightly slower pace than the plainclothes bouncers who circulate tirelessly through the crowd, neutralizing trouble before it starts. This combination of discipline, vigilance, and respect is all part of a return to traditional ways of presenting hip hop. Which is why Disco Fever's reopening was just the shot in the arm New York's embattled rap community needed. (718) 294-9514.

MISDA MANNERS

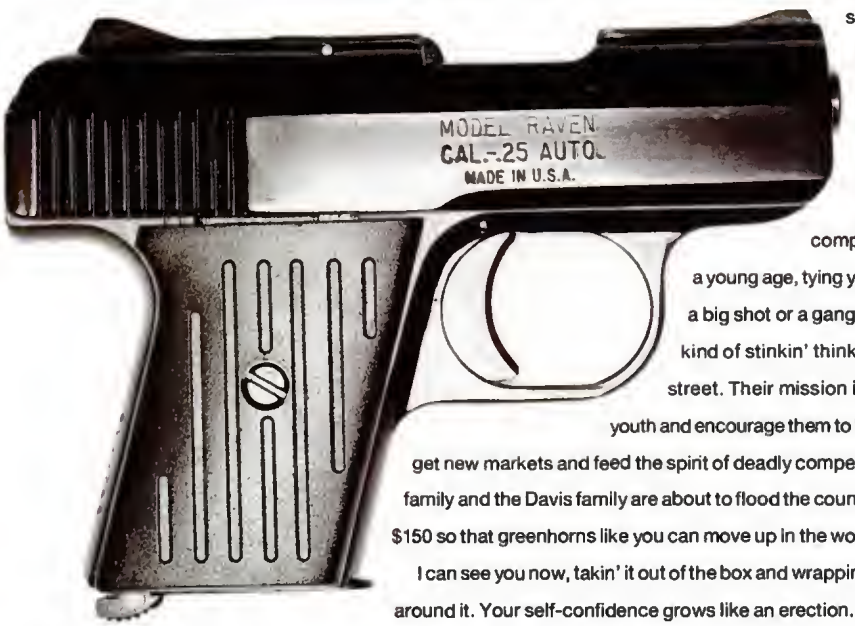
By Bönz Malone

Hypothetically, if you had a beef on the tuph side of the street and someone said, "Chooze your weapon!" giving you a choice of (a) the Raven .25, (b) the Jennings .22, or (c) the Lorcin L-25, which would you chooze? "Uhh, the Raven?" NOT!! You'd be dead before the first shot! When it's war, you always go for the heaviest piece. The .22s and .25s are for kidz and niggaz' grandmothers.

Thoze smaller guns are manufactured by the Jennings family and their friends from outta Southern California. They turn out a reported 400,000 pieces of junk a year but virtually go unnoticed 'cuz the Tecs, AKs, and Mac 10s are all ATF agents really care about recovering. You can get a .25, .22, or .380 anywhere!

I usually get my shit delivered to me in a pizza box from Fat Joe's Mob restaurant in the ville. I'd pay anywhere from $125 to $350 for a handgun of this particular caliber. Only in New York, though; in the South and the Midwest, they're as cheap as $35!

If you've read your history on this survival subject, then you'll know about all the casualties that are listed in the obituary section of the *Chicago Tribune, L.A. Times, The Washington Post,* and our own *Daily Newz.* Nothing but lil' kidz blowin' up themselves. Complete arms, faces vanishing before your missing eyes! Is that how you want to go out—like a sucker? I say nay! Some of theze scumbag manufacturers make the little lunch-box-size pistols in fun colors and styles to appeal to kidz. I even heard about a guy making gunz out of beepers!



It's like cigarettes. The companies want to get you at a young age, tying you to the glamor of being a big shot or a gangsta. NOT! Following that kind of stinkin' thinkin' gets you dead in the street. Their mission is to arm generations of youth and encourage them to "blow shit up!" In order to get new markets and feed the spirit of deadly competition, both the Jennings family and the Davis family are about to flood the country with 9mms at around $150 so that greenhorns like you can move up in the world.

I can see you now, takin' it out of the box and wrapping your masculine handz around it. Your self-confidence grows like an erection. You tell the whole block that you got a burner. They (your peers) gas you intuh stickin' up shit and then you're on your way, springboarding into a promising career as a felon. First you start out small with a token-booth heist, then a bodega, then Grand Union. You're on a roll, kid! Go for the Bro. Louie's chicken shack and then of course the liquor store. See how easy this iz? Isn't it fun? Wait! What are you doin'? Naw, don't fuck with him, he's crazy! NO! NO! **BANG!!!**

Now what have we learned today? That a kid who lives for tomorrow doesn't need a gun. People like the Jennings and Davis families are put on this earth to destroy it. Finally, if it's a statement you're tryin' to make, then you ain't sayin' much wit' that cheap piece of shit you got! If the Duke was still alive, he'd gun your ass down in the street—no fuss, no muss.

Any questions?

"Yeah, what kind of gun do you carry, Bönz?"

I use dynamite!...Peace, no piece.

PHOTOGRAPH BY HOWARD ROSENBERG

PALEFACE

imagine if Ice Cube were knocking on your door right now. What would you do?

"I might get violent. I probably would get violent on his ass just for talking so much shit about white folks," says San Francisco rapper Paleface (a.k.a. "The Blue-Eyed Devil"), who in his industrial rock/rap tune "O'Shea Jackson (Diss Therapy)" attacks Ice Cube, calling him a "punk bitch" and "a dumb uneducated fool" and telling him, "Next time you fuckin' call me a cracker, I'll smack ya!"

BLUE-EYED DEVIL

So why all the attitude against a rapper you've never met?

"'Cuz he's generalizing white people as devils, like all of us are blue-eyed devils and this and that. And I'm sitting there thinking that I'm buying all his records and he's just capping on white people in general, like white bitches have no butt and no chest and we all fuck slow—that pisses me off....This is definitely one white person who's going to take that message to the white people; to try to shut him down." ***Billy Jam***

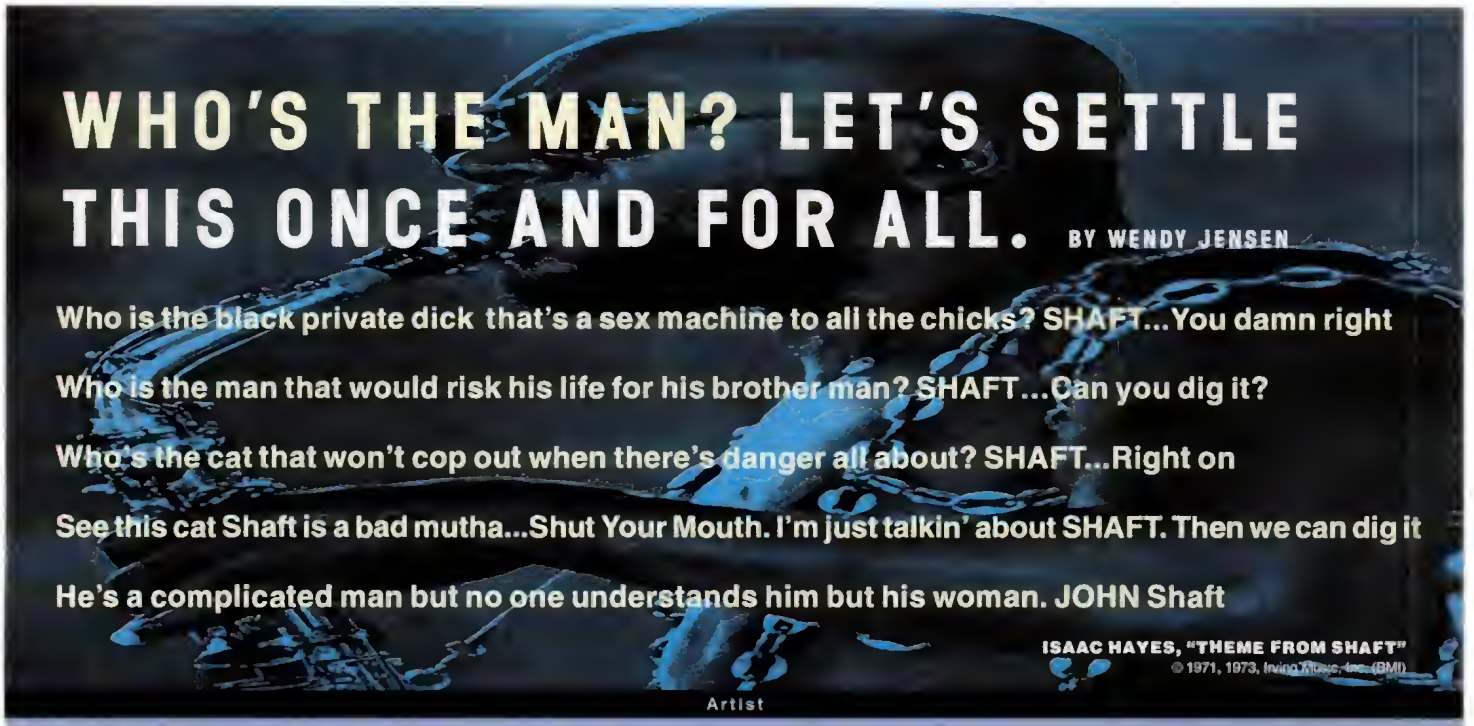


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PHOTOGRAPH MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES

WHO'S THE MAN? LET'S SETTLE THIS ONCE AND FOR ALL.

BY WENDY JENSEN

Who is the black private dick that's a sex machine to all the chicks? SHAFT...You damn right

Who is the man that would risk his life for his brother man? SHAFT...Can you dig it?

Who's the cat that won't cop out when there's danger all about? SHAFT...Right on

See this cat Shaft is a bad mutha...Shut Your Mouth. I'm just talkin' about SHAFT. Then we can dig it

He's a complicated man but no one understands him but his woman. JOHN Shaft

ISAAC HAYES, "THEME FROM SHAFT"
© 1971, 1973, Irving Music, Inc. (BMI)

Artist	Track	Men Talk	Men-O-Meter
Anthrex	I'm the Man, (Uncensored Version)	I'm the man/ I'm the man/ I'm so bad/ I should be in detention	14
Beastie Boys	The Maestro	Who is the man/ Coming down your block... One thing you ought to know/ Well I am the maestro	14
Boogie Down Productions	Build and Destroy	Who?/ The first man with the first tan on the first land with the first plan/ Who gives e damn?	14
James Brown	Papa Don't Take No Mess, Pt. 1	Papa is the man who can understand/ How e man has to do whatever he can... Hit me!	3
Chubb Rock	I'm the Man	The brilliant man you know he's/gonna set the night on fire/Any female structure/ Biologically I'm the man	11
Dr. Dre	Lil' Ghetto Boy	Who's the man/with the master plan? A nigga witta mother-fuckin' gun	10
Father M.C.	Pimp or Die	I'm the man/That's how I get down/I find recruits, knock the boots, And then I gotta skip town	1
Gang Starr	I'm the Man	I'll kick your can from here to Japan with e force you can't understend/ 'cuz I'm the mother-fuckin' man	9
Heavy D & the Boyz	I'm the Man	Here's something you can't under-stand/Tell me y'all/ Who's the man?	26
House of Pain	Who's the Man?	I'd rather that I died/ I got too much pride/ I guess it's just some-thing that you can't understand/ My gun is my hend, Tell me/ Who's the man	55
Joe Jackson	I'm the Man	I'm the men/ I'm the man/ I'm the man...etc.	91
Kool G Rap & D. J. Polo	Fuck U Man	Bitches get open like e can/ Leave it up to G Rap/Cuz I'm the neighbor-hood fuck you man	1
Curtis Meyfield	Pusherman	I'm your doctor when you need/ Want some coke have some weed/You know me, I'm your friend/Your main boy thick and thin/I'm your pusherman	14
Run-D.M.C.	Down with the King	I'm the man ya see in the place to be/ I went to John Jay University/ Since kin-dergarten I acquired the knowledge/ And after 12th grade I went straight to college	1
Muddy Waters	Mannish Boy	I'm e man/ I spell M...A...N.	28

411 BLACK BRIT—The shiny black cabs of London are afraid to go into Toyin Agbetu's neighborhood at night. When I ask to stop at the home of the 26-year-old owner of Unyque Artists Recording Group, the driver is visibly disturbed, asking twice if this is really where I want to be. The tiny duplex belonging to Agbetu and his Anglo-Guyanese partner, Delores Springer, is in an ethnically mixed "housing estate," which is polite Londonese for the projects. A pragmatist trapped between the dysfunctional economic policies of both the Conservative and Labour parties, Agbetu struggles to hang on to a business that provides employment for friends and family.

This erstwhile computer specialist is a native Brit of Nigerian extraction who started his own record label rather than join thousands of youth on the dole. Before Lisa Stansfield and Soul II Soul became household names in America, Agbetu's R&B groups were pioneering those downtempo dance grooves. When British acid house developed into droning techno, Agbetu became one of the few black producers (under various pseudonyms but principally Nemesis) to launch a series of regional techno hits. Still, the economic climate isn't good for independent labels in Britain—just ask capsized imprints like Rough Trade and Factory. Even Jazzie B of Soul II Soul hasn't managed to do what Agbetu has—maintain a fully autonomous, black-owned record label dedicated to developing and hiring black British talent.
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FROM DA MOUTHS OF BABES

Pint-size rappers coming atraight outta lunchroom

It seemed so innocent, really. Get a couple of cute kids, make them wear their clothes backwards, adopt a precociously "hard" attitude, throw in a really good hook, and hope for a novelty hit. Kris Kross and producer Jermaine Dupri (19 at the time) got more than lucky: they scored a platinum single with "Jump," a multi-platinum album with *Totally Krossed Out*, and made a lot of people worry.

Child entertainers are supposed to be cute: Michael Jackson was cute; Donny and Marie were cute; Tiffany and Debbie Gibson were, to some, cute. Chris Smith and Chris Kelly, now 14 and 15 respectively, are cute, but the Mack Daddy swagger is unsettling. These kids aren't just acting hard; they actuelly *think* they're herd.

What was endearingly precocious in a video now cerries overtones of menace. And following in the footprints of Kris Kross are a host of sparsely pubed rappers. Armed with some of the best producers in the industry and blessed with legitimate flow, these kids are dropping some reasonably serious s***.

ILLEGAL, the latest creation of Dallas Austin, the men who brought you Boyz II Men, are Jamal Phillips (14) and Malik Edwards (13). Produced by Erick Sermon, formerly of EPMD, Illegal can make legitimate claims to hardcore funk rap. Their style is kindred to Das EFX, and their music has the halting, bass-heavy feel of a Hit Squad production. They dissed 17-year-old rapper Chi-Ali on their debut single, "Head or Gut" (Rowdy), so he showed up at their New York showcase and started a fight. Kids.

At 19, Havoc and Prodigy of **MOBB DEEP** are the five-foot-three elder statesmen of kid rap. Though they scatter vulgarities all over *Juvenile Hell* (4th & B'way), their ready-for-radio effort "Peer Pressure" is squeaky clean. Produced by DJ Premier of Gang Starr, the cut addresses "how it is in the world of today, growing up as a young black teen." Dreams of successful careers go up in buddha smoke and gunfire. Though the lyrics are didactic, the jazz-flavored beats make the neck move.

Though **DA YOUNGSTA'S** vocal style is more aggressive than Kris Kross's, the lyrics on their debut album (written for them by 20-year-old Mentally Gifted) were strictly PG, addressing subjects like curfews, neighborhood bullies, and mom. But for their latest, *The Aftermath* (EastWest), Qu'ran (14), Taji (15), and Tarik (15) are sporting bald heads, gold teeth, and—you guessed it—coming back *hard*. With production by Pete Rock, Marley Marl, DJ Premier, and the Beatnuts, as well as guest appearances by Treach and C.L. Smooth, the credits to *The Aftermath* read like a benefit album. It works. "Crewz Pop" is the catchiest kid rap since "Jump."

TLC are actuelly grown women, so they don't qualify as kid rappers. **IMMATURE** (Virgin) is a trio of 11- and 12-year-olds, so they do. But aside from age and gender, they are the same. Same colorful, oversize clothing, same catchy pop tracks with a couple of ballads thown in. Marques, Don, and Jerome kick a few "honey dips" and a "roll like a joint." They even menage one elaborate (for a kid) double entendre in "I got da munchies for you baby," from "Da Munchies." But like TLC, they're just too cute to be offensive.

JORDY, a blond, French five-year-old, has an internetional smash in "Dur Dur D'Etre Bebe!" which translates roughly—very roughly—as "It's a Bitch Being a Baby." Jordy doesn't actually rap; his producer/ father has patched together snippets of lines over e vaguely club/house track (a technique pioneered by Madonna). **NEW BORN**'s Sammy D., at nine years of age the youngest true rapper, sings and rhymes passably well on "Falling in Love" (Relativity), a tale of classroom infatuation told over a very new jack swing. But neither his flow nor his production can match his competition, some of whom have legitimate skills.

WHOOLIGANZ, two hardcore white boys from L.A (said to have attended Beverly Hills High, though Tommy Boy, their label, strenuously denies any connection to the 90210 zip code), drop soon, as does **RAVEN SYMONE**, the precocious step-granddaughter from "The Cosby Show." Even more cloyingly sweet than her TV character, *Here's To New Dreams* (MCA) boasts e plausible pop hit in "That's What Little Girls Are Made of." The girl has got a little flow, but the rascally ragga remix is just silly.

The death knell for kid rap should sound shortly after **THE CHIPMUNKS** hit the studio. When "Bust a Nut" drops, it's over. *Max Ernst*





Mirror, Mirror

Paris style guru Karl Lagerfeld keeps *très* busy designing collections for Chloé, Lagerfeld, end Chanel, but he must be watching a lot of Video Music Box in his free time. His Chanel collections always seem to bite hip hop street fashion. Two years ago there were fat gold chains and baseball caps. Last year he made the models bare their underwear waistbands homeboy style. This fall the look wes chain-link necklaces with padlock medallions—just like the one worn by Treech of Naughty by Nature. Treach says he wears the chain for all his homies who are locked down. Maybe the Chanel chains are for slaves to fashion.

Emil Wilbekin

Photographs Clockwise from top : Linda Cavallo, Ernie Paniccioli, Dan Ashby


DENIM
GENERATION
YOU WOULD BE PERFECTLY
HAPPY WITHOUT THESE JEANS.

MY HOOD

ROCK STEADY PARK

Most inner-city playgrounds have certain things in common. There's the old heads and the new jacks, summer outdoor jams, netless basketball hoops, water fountains that never work, local pride in the neighborhood hangout, and, unfortunately—drugs and violence. Few playgrounds, however, gain acclaim outside their community.

The situation at the P.S. 163 playground on 98th and Amsterdam in Manhattan has always been a classic urban paradox. The 24th police precinct is only 50 yards away, yet pot, dope, and acid could be purchased from the park benches as easily as beers from the bodega across the street. The park has also been a haven for stick-up kids to escape from five-ills as it has numerous strategically situated alleys and climbable fences with holes on all ends. Anything went on there, from my 13-year-old neighbor losing her virginity on the seesaw to a homeless wino masturbating atop a stone chess table. With the park doubling as a public urinal and with the abundance of broken Yoo-Hoo, Coco Rico, and Schaefer bottles on the ground, it wasn't exactly the place you'd want your daughter playing double-dutch.

On the positive side, in the late '70s and early '80s, P.S. 163 gained international, national, and all-city notoriety as a hotbed of youth culture manifested through basketball and B-boys. To ball players, the park was simply known as "The Goat," named after playground legend Earl "The Goat" Manigault. To the hip hop community, it was always "Rock Steady Park," named for The Rock Steady Crew.

The Rock Steady Crew are regarded as the best all-time B-boys (the True-School term for breakdancers). They are an ethnically mixed group that once ran 500 deep with chapters in every borough. The park became the meeting point for all chapters before they would slide to the Roxy or U.S.A. It was also the site for their appearance in Malcolm McLaren's "Buffalo Gals" video.

According to longtime members Crazy Legs and Ken Swift, the park has always been their sanctuary and stomping ground, a home away from home. All day long they'd practice their footwork, top rock, routines, etc., in the back of the park by the swings. Then at night they'd practice aerosol arts on the roof of the school building. No one who saw them could ever forget the handball wall "Eye of the Tiger" and the "Sky's the Limit" piece by graffiti writer Bill Blast.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar once proclaimed Earl Manigault the best guard out of New York he'd ever played against. Though Earl never played a single pro game, he was a regular at the park, as was future Knick Reggie Carter. But most players at the Goat were dedicated blacktop heads, probably best represented by Tommy Ryer, who once scored 110 points in a game. Then there was Chris Avignone, otherwise known as Jesus, a six-foot-one skinny white kid with crazy long hair who won a New York high school All-Star Game dunk contest, *and* took the MVP, but never played college ball. Another park regular was all-city guard Richie Simmons (who went on to play at Iona College), also known as "99%" for his uncanny jump shot. He'd miss maybe once a week. You could find him practicing in the dark after midnight almost every night.

I can't leave out Woody, a Dominican kid who looked exactly like Bernardo from the movie *West Side Story*. He was the only B-boy who ever played serious ball. He'd call "winners" with his white gloves on, fresh from boogieing, then come on and shoot from downtown. I remember one time his sneaker fell off at halfcourt and everyone was screaming with laughter. A true B-boy, he never laced his sneakers, not even when balling.

At its height, "The Goat" had ballplayers from the tri-state area coming down to wait sometimes five or six games just to get it on. There was nothing more important than playing; it didn't matter if you won or lost, just how you looked when you took it. Did you lose the defender with a boogie move and make the kids who had next laugh at him?

Nowadays the park has lost its spirit of stiff competition. But rumor has it that Portland Trail Blazer Mario Elie is planning to hold a Pro-Am tournament that should bring the level back up. On the hip hop side, the park has stayed strong. On the regular you can find artists from the CM Mob like Kurious Jorge, KMD, Powerule, the Beatnuts, the Grim Reaper, and Big Hoppoh The Tremongous Booboley rhyming in a cipher with beatbox by Lord Sear. Rock Steady even held their 16th Anniversary Jam at the park with beats provided by DJ Afrika Bambaataa of the Universal Zulu Nation. The handball wall was done up by aerosol artist Doze, the Cold Crush Brothers did their thing, and of course Rock Steady were B-boying on the floor where they belong. *Bobbito Garcia*

PHOTOGRAPH ANDRE LAMBERTSON



Ken Swift (with can), Crazy Legs (with cap), and other Crewmembers chill at the park.

411 BLACK FUTURE—If you already live and die by your sky-pager, maybe it's time you tapped into yet another form of high-tech communication: electronic mail. Cyberspace—gateway to massive amounts of electronic information—has much to offer the postmodern Pan-African community. The phone cables and computers used to access e-mail networks (also known as bulletin board systems) are within the economic reach of anyone who can afford a good drum machine or synthesizer.

E-mail users can bypass standard media like newspapers and television by subscribing to networks that allow them to "download" UPI files, ongoing research in specific areas of medicine, technology, and world economics, or advice from legal or business experts for less than most lawyers' hourly fees. A well-trained casual user can get thousands of dollars of value out of a $20 monthly subscription.

One black pioneer in this area is Arthur McGee, a computer specialist who keeps North America's most complete listing of black-run or black-oriented e-mail networks. McGee started his own bulletin board, Black Data Processing Associates/Bay Area Chapter, after he became dissatisfied with the "colorless" options available to technologically literate folks like himself. In short, the bland, monocultural model of computer communication—once an ideal—has gotten a little, well ... boring. BDPA/BAC: (707) 552-3314.


DENIM
GENERATION
BUT YOU'D BE NAKED.





STEP

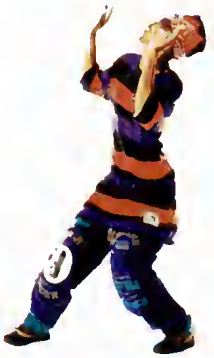
"New year—new style—new dance e lick
Fling your hend inna the eir, then you rock then you dip
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Step forwerd and come out back quick
Thet are the new style
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Rock Bogle dence 'cause music sweet you
Bogle a run the place night and day
So just rock Bogle dance from your tune a pley."
Buju Banton, "Bogle"



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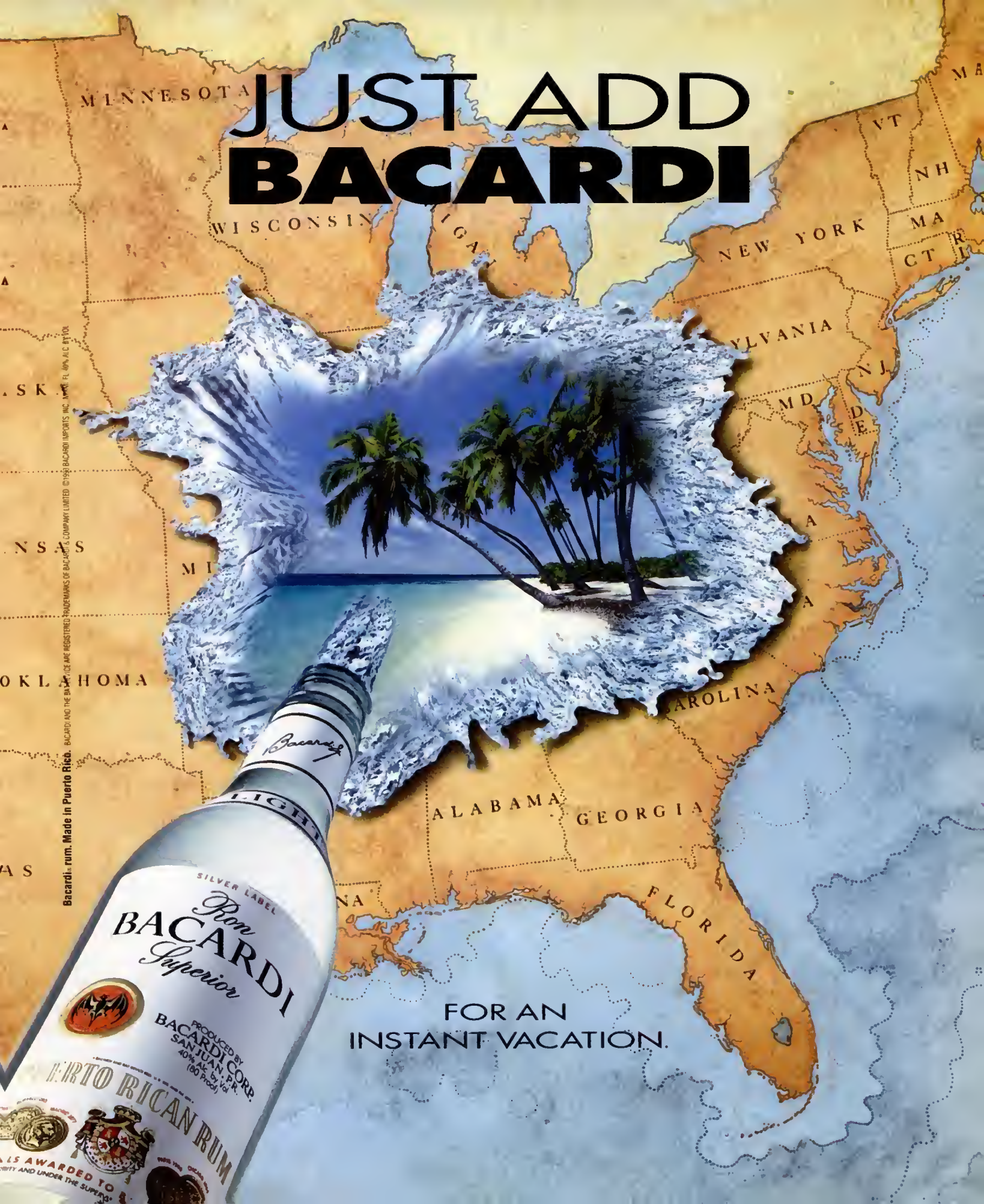
PHOTOGRAPHS JANETTE BECKMAN

BOGLE DANCE

Featuring Bogle P

By the time Buju Benton released the hit tune "Bogle," the wickedest dance out of JA wes the order of the dey from Flatbush to London. Now the steps created by Kingston's Gereld Levy (who got the nickname "Bogle" from his resemblance to one of Jamaica's national heroes), have been reinterpreted on verious versions by dancers like Bogle P (shown here) from Brooklyn. But the new-brand iick is the butterfly dance. As deejay Jigsy King says, it's "the ietest style weh the girls them like." *Iley Brown*

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PHOTOGRAPH BY BARRON CLAIBORNE. STYLING BY STEFAN CAMPBELL. MAKEUP BY SAM FINE FOR REVLON

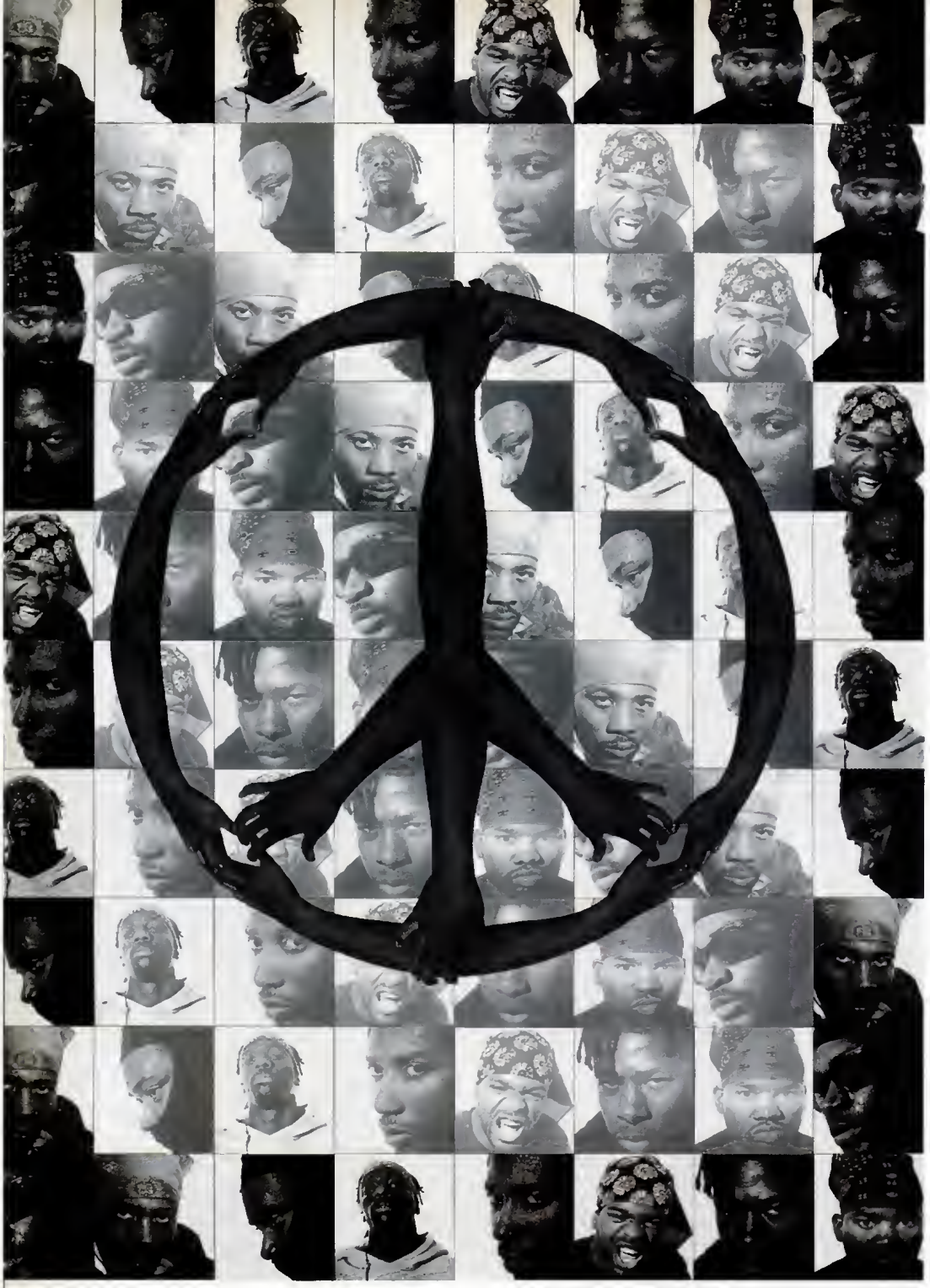
Lorraine Pascale brings soul-sista realness to the runway. Sashay! Shanté!

THAT'S RIGHT Y'ALL, LORRAINE PASCALE is B-L-A-C-K. If you're like most Nubians or Europeens who have no use for yellow Africans, it's predictable protocol that the espresso complexion just got you wide open. If you're like my Grandma, who cringes at the sight of full lips, nappy hair, and coffee-with-no-milk-colored skin, you probebly would've mistaken the beauty for intelligence or sweetness hed it been seated in your living room. And if you're like me, whose Grandma obviously encouraged her to stey smart and sweet, you smile every time you see Lorraine Pascale's face.

Revenge couldn't be sweeter then e full-lipped, bald-headed, blue-black beauty rakin' in the modeling dough. But even fiercer is the fact that when Pascale appears in magazines and advertisements, her image reeks of African-Caribbean diva attitude. Although she was born to Jamaican and St. Lucian parents, Pascale was adopted and raised by white folks in London. "It's strange," Pascale says with a smile. "[The black sensibility] must be there on a subconscious level."

If you've ever eyed African models, you know they can either project their black-girl flavor or pose in blackface. While Pascale has chosen the former, doing so hasn't been the easiest task. "In the beginning"—she pauses—"it used to really get to me." Late last year with center parts and shegs being "in"—and modeling paying the bills—Pescele traded her natural for a weeve. "But then all of the sudden I didn't care," she says with e giggle. "I'm black. I'm African. And I'm strong. I don't went to sit in e cheir six hours every three months to get these things put in my hair end *pay ell this money*. This is me. If you don't like it, then don't book me. If you want somebody with bone-straight hair, then book e white girl."

Angry letters protesting Banana Republic's booking of one too many white girls is how she and Jeson Olive wound up in the clothier's spring ad campaign. Like the booking of Karen Alexander by Ralph "Polo" Lauren a few years back, this is e tremendous milestone in Pescale's cereer. Regardless, she knows thet most advertisers still consider "black girls' features too strong." Case in point is the current retro-'70s weif bendwegon, which has not provided much work for black models. Pascale says, "As far as the industry's concemed there aren't any black girls." But rather then let the politics overwhelm her, Pascele hes learned to use



them to her advantage. Not only is she guaranteed most of the work in the "ethnic" casting (see Barneys New York's 1993 spring campaign, *Allure*, and *Harper's Bazaar*), but she gets to travel and make more money than the average 20-year-old. Pascale's three-year-old gig is merely a stepping stone to the next point—acting and singing. "Once I've reached the top there," she says with a smile, "then I'll be on the cover of *Bazaar* and *Vogue*." *Ipeleng Kgositsile*

RAPPERS

Staten Island is *finally* in the house with Wu-Tang Clan

"STATEN ISLAND IS LIKE NEW YORK'S forgotten borough," says Wu-Tang Clan's Prince Rakeem. "You have to ride a boat to get over here, or get across that big-ass bridge. But being isolated was good. It gave us a chance to develop our style and slang. We didn't have to get it from Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, or Queens."

NEXT

The eight members of the Clan (Prince Rakeem: The RZA; The Genius: The GZA; Inspektor Deck: The Rebel; Raekwon: The Chef; Method Man; Ol' Dirty Bastard; U God) and out to prove that Staten Island, while not exactly hip hop central, is more than just the land of loud-mouthed, gum-cracking, big-haired women à la *Working Girl*.

Their debut single, "Protect Ya Neck," the first S.I.-bred hip hop track since the Force M.D.s' syrupy "Tender Love," is a bass-driven song filled with swift and sharp rhymes, a style Wu-Tang likes to call "chopping sword." Explains Prince Rakeem, "Right now everybody is rickety, rickety, rickety. But we say 'protect ya neck' because we're chopping off heads with a sword, but the sword is our mouths."

Victims of Wu-Tang's verbal decapitation include record-company executives, whom group members say double-crossed them in earlier deals ("First of all who's your A&R/A mountain climber who plays an electric guitar?/But, he don't know the meaning of dope/When he's looking for a suit and tie rap that's cleaner than a bar of soap"). Prince Rakeem was not happy with Tommy Boy Records's handling of his debut single, "Oh, We Love You Rakeem"; his cousin The Genius felt the same way about his higher-ups at Cold Chillin' Records after the release of *Words From The Genius*. But by asking lots of questions, sneaking into music-industry conventions to network, and getting a bit of advance from friend, rapper, and entrepreneur Positive K, the boys formed Wu-Tang Records. "We got two sides of the story," Prince Rakeem brags. "We got the industrial side and we got the regular street side. See that's the reason why we made a little bit of noise."

That noise helped raise the loot to press cassette and vinyl copies of "Protect Ya Neck" and to distribute them independently to Manhattan and

PHOTOGRAPH BY JASON BECK. HAIR AND GROOMING ERIC SCOTT FOR HSN



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Brooklyn record stores. Much to the band's surprise, close to 10,000 copies of the single were sold before it was picked up by RCA last summer.

Aside from their RCA deal, they also acquired a solo album contract for the Ol' Dirty Bastard on Elektra Records and possibly one for the Method Man on Def Jam. Says their promotions man Mike McDonald: "Some of the shit was shady, but we did what we had to do." *Abbie Kearse*

NEXT

YOU KNOW BILL BELLAMY. HE'S that hip cat on *Russell Simmons' Def Comedy Jam*, dressed to the buppie-chic nines, bopping around the stage like it's a singles bar, regaling the crowd with you-know-how-it-is monologues about booty calls and car alarms. He's the smooth guy at the water cooler who had a mad hectic weekend and wants you to know every last detail. He's also the Cross Colour-ed homeboy hosting *MTV Jams*, dropping hip hop lingo for the masses as he introduces the clips and slipping in a sly joke every once in a while.

In today's fast-forward, crossover pop culture, Bellamy has all the bases covered, positioned just right for a major homerun. "I've got the hip hop crowd loving me, the young white kids, the suit-and-tie brothers and sisters," he says about his growing fan base. "If I can make all those people laugh, I think I have the good makings of becoming a star, you know, being really large."

No arrogance here, just an overabundance of 1990s Negro confidence. And with the sudden explosion of prime-time black comedy, from local clubs to Martin Lawrence's Fox TV hit, *MARTIN*, Bellamy's confidence can only work in his favor. "I can't compare myself to Martin or Eddie Griffin or the other guys, 'cause they're all funny, they all got their own style. But I think I can hang with everybody out there."

The 26-year-old Newark, N.J., native discovered his comedic prowess as a student at Rutgers University, doing stand-up at talent shows. But after college, he took a job as a promotions manager for a cigarette manufacturer. "I had a company car, the whole nine, but I was trying to do stand-up at night."

And when he got a nest egg stored away, comedy became his full-time gig—but he didn't need the stash. He got an Apollo spot immediately and his career took off. Next came touring and *Def Comedy Jam* and auditions for TV shows and films—leading up to his debut in the rap whodunit *Who's the Man?*.

Apparently, he's the man. Women scream with delight for his slim build and coiffed 'do. Guys get into his ability to play on the fragile masculine psyche. Everybody loves the way he puts a spin on romantic posturing. Particularly in his rousing "booty call" sketch, which recounts, with lifelike sound effects and gestures, the experience we all go through in the one-night-stand dating game.

"It's hard to get men to laugh, because of my image, the Pretty Boy Floyd-type brother," he says. "I might intimidate brothers at first. But then they realize I'm not trying to play some old super-duper-fly Mack Daddy role. This is just how I dress. But I get up there, making faces, falling down, buggin' out, and they know that I'm real."

"The next move for Bill Bellamy," says Bellamy, "is to be the largest thing since Eddie Murphy." Shouldn't be too hard. He's already worked with Murphy, one of his idols, when the pair co-hosted *MTV Jams* one weekend last summer. "That was one of the benchmarks of my career," Bellamy says now. "Not only was I bugging out with Eddie Murphy, but, oh man, it was televised and everybody saw me bugging out with Eddie Murphy." At the beginning of the show Bellamy introduced Murphy as the funniest man alive. Murphy shot back, "One of the funniest." *Scott Poulson-Bryant*



Bill Bellamy is no fool in chic clothing

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD DUNKLEY. STYLING BY STEFAN CAMPBELL. GROOMING BY TONY MARSHALL FOR WJK/NYC


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PHOTOGRAPH BY ANN STATES/SABA

Radcliffe Bailey's voice is better seen than heard

ARTIST

RADCLIFFE BAILEY IS A HIP HOP ARTIST: 75 PERcent jazz and 25 percent rap. He samples, he tells stories—he's even got two videos on MTV. But instead of spinning records and rapping on the mike, Bailey collages old family photographs, metal shackles, railroad ties, and bird houses to create multimedia pieces that broadcast messages about racial identity, empowerment, and injustice. He usually appears at galleries in Atlanta (his hometown), Charlotte, N.C., and the University of Cincinnati, but he's still best known as that dreadlocked brother painting in Arrested Development's "Tennessee" and "Mr. Wendal" videos.

In fact, it was his artwork, not his face, that was originally supposed to show up in the "Tennessee" video. Someone from the group called and asked to borrow a painting with a lynching theme. He didn't have one, so he made one overnight. The next day he took the painting to the video shoot and was asked to appear with his creation. "Those rap videos did an actual amount of justice for me because the particular audience that I wanted to communicate with saw my work," Bailey says. "You can't do your greatest work and put it in your closet. You've got to get it out there."

Thanks to those AD cameos, the 24-year-old Bailey, who still lives with his parents, has become a bit of a celebrity. But life wasn't always so promising. He spent elementary school in special-education classes, knowing there was nothing wrong with him, "staring out the window because I was bored with what I was learning." Then in high school, while he made C's, D's, and F's (which one teacher referred to as "common, damn, fools"), he was a star on the baseball team, and played semi-pro baseball for the Atlanta Saints for six months after graduation. Bored again, he decided to go to art school, where he helped start a black-students organization. By his junior year, Radcliffe had his first gallery showing along with several of his college professors.

These days, Radcliffe sits in his studio listening to John Coltrane, shooting at canvases with a gun, chopping sculptures with an ax, branding pieces of wood with a burning iron, and contemplating his current series on Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder, and places of rebirth. He also helps set up arts programs for Atlanta's Head Start program, and mentors children from the inner city. "I try to tie everything together," he says. "I'm steppin' into the realm of performance art." *E. W.*

PRODUCER

Extreme's Nuno Bettencourt is rocking rap music

NUNO BETTENCOURT ISN'T EXACTLY THE FIRST name that comes to mind when the subject is rap. Yet the pretty-boy guitarist of Boston rock group Extreme may one day become a chapter—or at least a footnote—when the history of hip hop is written. Owner of the fledgling Color Blind Records (distributed by A&M), Bettencourt has coproduced *Real Chemistry* by Top Choice Clique, whose first single, "I Think to Myself," made it onto the *Posse* soundtrack.

That was sort of a fluke. "Someone at A&M sent the song to Mario Van Peebles, and he heard it, liked it, and wanted it," Bettencourt says. "I had nothing to do with it." But even though Color Blind won't be devoted exclusively to hip hop, Top Choice Clique is the whole reason Bettencourt started the label. "A friend of a friend of a friend gave me the tape a while ago," he says. "I just really wanted to work with them."

The Top Choice Clique trio consists of John P, 23, writer and rapper; Force the Sorcerer, 20, producer, writer, and rapper; DJ Gemini, 23. They're all Boston-area boys who ceught the hip hop fever as high school students and have been working together for the last six years. Bettencourt gives coproducer Force, a veteran of the New England hip hop scene, the lion's share of the credit for the album's pristine New Jack Swing, with acoustic guitar samples and clearly enunciated rhyme ambience. "I personally think Force is a genius," Bettencourt says. "For his age and everything, I couldn't believe the ideas that he had. I've worked with a lot of people in the studio, but Force really impressed me."

John P reckons that the group's songs are "reflections of life." Top Choice Clique isn't about gangsta rap or any of that negative stuff, G. *Real Chemistry* features such tracks as "My Conscience Speaks to Me" and "Killing Me Softly," and the lyrical concerns range from heving to sell drugs to support your wife to missing your girl so much it hurts real *bad*.

Force, John P, and DJ Gemini realize that they've grabbed the brass ring, and they want to hold on to it. "We'd been out there for a long time for not a lot of pay," says John P. "We'd had some interest from independent labels and shady promoters but, we're glad we hooked up with Nuno."

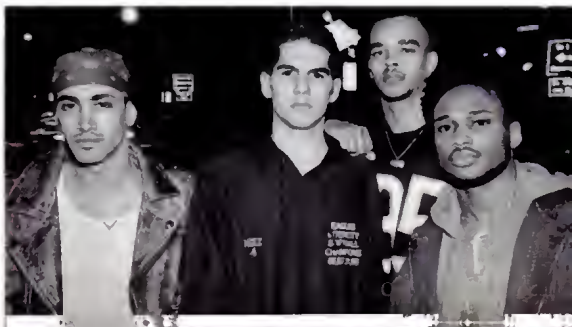
So has Bettencourt always been a closet rap fan?

"As far as hip hop goes, Boston doesn't have a very heavy scene," he admits. "I've listened to some, and these guys really turned me on to a lot of different stuff. I took to liking Cypress Hill and EPMD. Ice Cube is a bit aggressive, but I think it's a great-sounding record."

Only time will tell, though, if Bettencourt's got more than words to prove he's down. *Tom Sinclair*

PHOTOGRAPH BY BOB AND TERRY RICHARDSON

Bettencourt, *left,* and Top Choice Clique.



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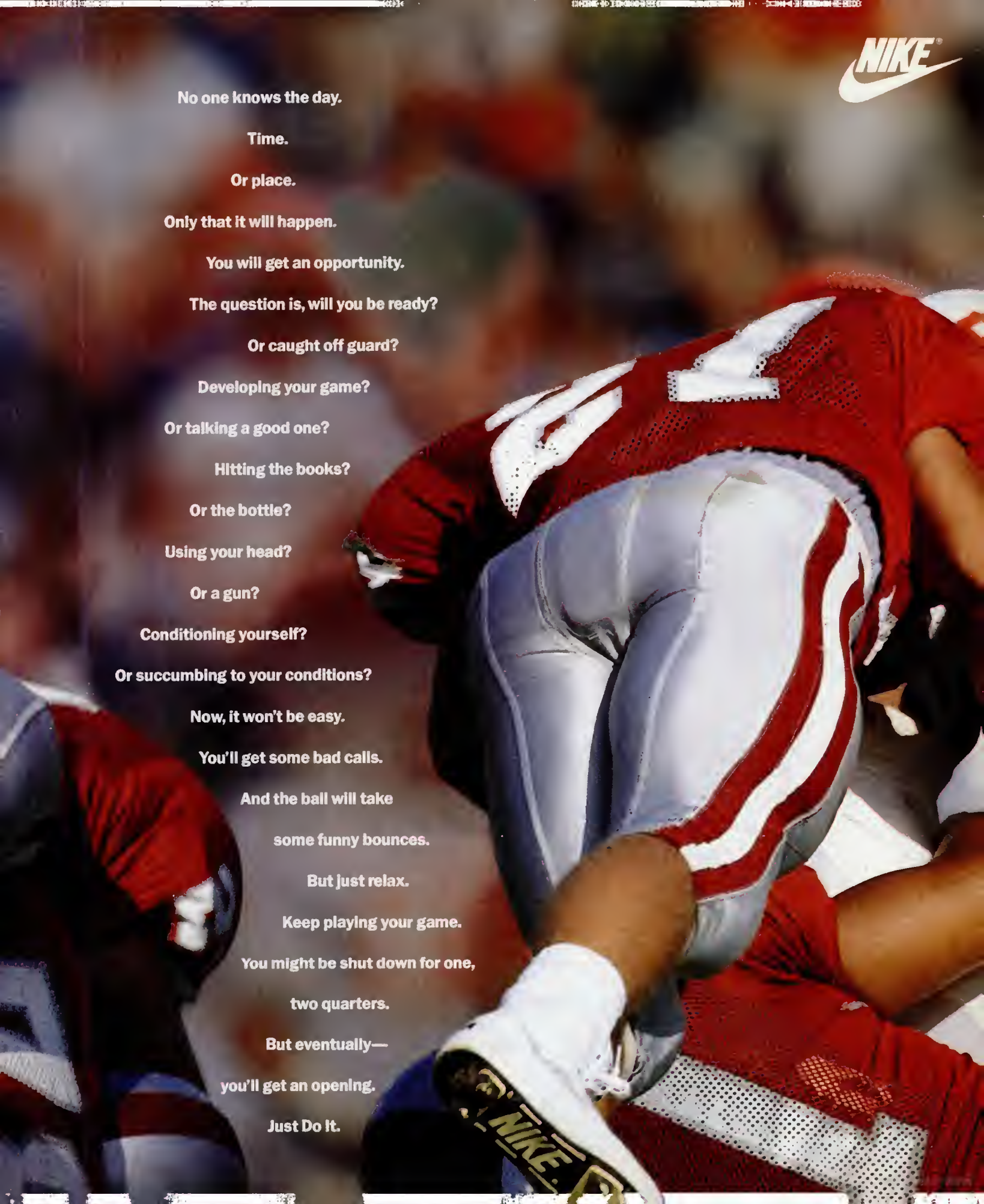
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HOT DOGG

His album is the most eagerly anticipated debut in hip hop history. Join Kevin Powell *for a Snoop Dogg-day afternoon.*

Photographs by Dan Winters

Inside the television room of the Village Recorder studio in West Los Angeles, Snoop Doggy Dogg stands nose-to-nose with his cousin, a tall, copper-complexioned man who is wildly defending his point. "That's how you want it?" his cousin says, trying to cover his concern for Snoop with a display of machismo.

"That's how it's gonna be," Snoop replies.

"You're doing it, there it is," says the cousin, dejectedly.

"This shit don't make no sense to me right now," Snoop retorts with a wave of his hands. "I want to be loved."

I half listen to their disagreement and stare at the massive television set mounted on the wall behind them. On the screen, the talking head of former Los Angeles police sergeant Stacey Koon is babbling about Rodney King, the need for law and order, and the South Central rebellion, which occurred a year ago this day. Like a restless toddler, Snoop spontaneously lunges over his cousin's left shoulder blade, molds his long fingers into a gun, and aims at the screen, directly at Koon's mouth: "Bam!" Taking the oral bullet as a cue, the man eases off Snoop's case and retreats. Confused by the swirl of events on and off screen, I ask Snoop what's going on.

"He was telling me," he begins in his syrupy southern twang, "for security purposes I need to probably hire him...." I fade out Snoop's voice for a moment, mentally juxtaposing last year's explosion of black rage with the fact that at that time no one, save the local underground scene, had ever heard of Snoop Doggy Dogg. Like that display of raw energy, Snoop blazed through rap music last summer on a mission, his drawl chanting from jeeps and groove-filled clubs—"'Cuz it's 1-8-7 on a undercover cop"—helping propel Dr. Dre's "Deep Cover" single to number one on the rap charts. If that tease wasn't enough, on Dre's multiplatinum *The Chronic* (the title was suggested by Snoop and by his own estimates he contributed a good 65 to 70 percent of the lyrics), Snoop's singsongy-hardcore style broke loose from the other guest vocalists on the album and stole the show. These performances marked him as one of the few rappers in hip hop history to establish a firm and identifiable presence before the release of his own debut album, *Doggy Style*, slated to hit the streets in early September.

But in spite of the buzz around Snoop's rap career, he refuses—as evidenced by his argument with his cousin—to succumb to the demands of fame. Until recently he had no car, and he still shares an apartment in Long Beach with his first cousin That Nigga Daz, and barely notices any of the women who parade in and out of the studio in search of him, Dre, or rapper the D.O.C. So here he is—21 years old, six foot four, pencil thin, and quite obviously only one generation removed from his family's Mississippi roots—arguing about his ability to protect himself against overzealous fans and

HAT: THE STUSSY UNION L.A. JACKET: GAT

envious knuckleheads. In essence, then, Snoop is more than hype. He's just a regular kid from the block who happens to have a rhyme virtuosiry that's the envy of rappers on both coasts.

With his weary, understated cadence, Snoop Doggy Dogg has upped the hip hop ante: No waving of baseball bats on album covers, no spitting in music videos, no bald heads. If you want a rapper who dramatizes the harshness of ghetto life, this is it.

And, on the surface at least, Snoop's lyrics are his reality. He still packs two guns ("It's just a protection thang. A nigga ain't gonna be out there slippin'"), and he never roams without the Dogg Pound—Daz, Kurupt, RBX, and his other buddies from the 'hood. So he doesn't even worry about the static that inevitably results from walking a fine line between ghetto life and life as a rap star. Perhaps subconsciously, Snoop's final response to his cousin's interrogation is also his declaration of who he was and who he claims to be. "I ain't young no more," he concludes. "I'm grown."

SNOOP'S WEARY, UNDERSTATED CADENCE HAS UPPED THE HIP HOP ANTE: NO WAVING OF BASEBALL BATS, NO SPITTING IN MUSIC VIDEOS, NO BALD HEADS.

The Village Recorder, according to an engineer and the platinum and gold albums that punctuate the walls, has been home to Cher, Eric Clapton, and Alice Cooper. For Snoop it is currently the only home he has other than Long Beach. Inside the studio, former N.W.A member Dr. Dre sits behind the control boards snapping his head back and forth to a contagious, bass-driven sound. Contrary to his media image, in person the burly Dre is reserved, even shy. The Dee Barnes incident and other legal entanglements still haunt him—most recently, he is being sued for breach of conttact by Ruthless Records, Eazy-E's label. But there's no denying his talent: With *The Chronic*, Dre managed to produce one of the more innovative albums—rap or otherwise—in recent memory. Now the head of his own company, Death Row Records, Dre isn't hesitant to praise Snoop Doggy Dogg's contribution to the rap gente.

"Snoop is gonna be atound a long time," Dre says, his thick hands palming each other, searching for words. "He's always coming up with different concepts and he's good in the studio. He can go on and ad lib a fuckin' song if he wants to. And it would be funky." Dre pauses again, then flashes an uncharacteristic smile. "Matter of fact, we did that on 'Nuthin' But A "G" Thang.' We put a little freestyle thing on there—I don't think they knew I was recording."

Meanwhile, the studio overflows with young black men milling about, some eating Fatburgers, some staring into space, others whispering loosely constructed rhymes to no one in particular. Snoop walks around the tiny studio like a wound-up scatecrow with a pink notepad tucked beneath his armpit. Snoop's hair is braided, his long, datk body a mannequin for a Death Row leather jacket, a black WeedWear T-shirt, very baggy gray pants, and old-school low-top canvas Converse sneakers. As accessories, a gold stub sparkles from Snoop's left ear and a gold chronic leaf pendant rests firmly on his chest. Like most homies in the L.A. area, Snoop is overdressed, but he's such a cool brother you would never know it's 85 degrees outside. Snoop is *so* laid back one gets the impression that he'll never write the lyrics for this latest Dre track. Between puffs on a blunt, he jots words down on the notepad, then turns around to me.

"You want some smoke?"

"No, I'm ay-ight," I say, because I don't smoke marijuana, and besides, the chronic is so potent I already have a contact. Oblivious, Snoop blows more smoke in my direction. Someone flips on the studio television set and coincidentally BET's *Rap City* is playing "Deep Cover" and "Nuthin' But A 'G' Thang" back to back. I look at Snoop: the smoking and writing have ceased. His eyes ate glued to the scteen.

"That's like classic shit," Snoop says matter-of-factly. "The beginning of the whole episode, how we put this shit together. Just watching our work from the beginning to where it's at now is to see a drastic improvement." That "drastic improvement" understates the relationship between Snoop and Dre. They have become friends who clearly tespect each othet's talents. Snoop eagetly sums it all up: "Whatevet it takes to keep it as a family thang," he says. "We don't want it to be just business—we want it to be family *and* business, so whenever shit gets salty, niggas can break away with no problems."

Snoop Doggy Dogg was born nearly 22 years ago in Long Beach, California, the second of his mother's three sons (his older brother is 24 and his younger brother is 14). Southeast of Los Angeles, Long Beach is a bustling, multicultural port city known for its beautiful split-level homes. However, much like South Central L.A., Long Beach's black community is bunched into the East Side, where poverty, drug trafficking, and gang activity is just part of the day.

Snoop's family—like most black families on the West Coast—migrated to California from the Deep South after World War II in search of work and better economic opportunities. Snoop's parents were never married, and none of the three boys share the same father. Nicknamed "Snoop" when he was a youngster—perhaps because his long face, thin lips, and wide ears resemble those of a cartoon canine—he refuses to tell me his real name.

"That's my teal name," he says, amused at the secret he is keeping from the public. "That's the key to my life, Snoop Dogg. I snoop. I don't like nobody snoopin' on me, I snoop on them, youknowhumsayin'?"

And I do know what Snoop is saying. Ghetto life creates its own terms for survival, its own names, its own heroes. Nicknames like "Mook" and "Pop" and "Smoky" populate every inner city in America, each moniker attached to a body that is repelling the constraints, both real and imagined, placed on that world. In Snoop's case, yeah, he may have grown up a lil' ghetto boy—fatherless, poor, more a student of the streets than of school—but at the very least his name debunks the myth that you know him. You may know his rype but you don't know him.

His childhood was rough, he says, though early on Snoop had a passion for sports and his mother took him and his older brothet to church every Sunday, where he sang in the choir. Instinctively, Snoop leans into my tape recorder: "I want to thank my mnmma for putting me in the church."

But neither the church nor sports were enough to keep Snoop out of trouble. His older brother, the most tangible male presence in his life, was his role model. And his brother's inclination toward street life influenced Snoop. "I would want to smoke weed and just kick it in the mix, but he'd be like, 'No, nigga, I don't want you hangin' with me.'" Unwilling to take no for an answer, Snoop formed his own clique and hit the streets.

Raised on the East Side of Long Beach until he was 15, Snoop moved with his family to North Long Beach and began in earnest his career as a hustler. When he noticed several of his homies from the East Side selling drugs in his new neighborhood, Snoop figured his chances of making real money were worth the next step he took. "I started selling every kind of narcotic you could think of," he says. "It wasn't no shit I was trying to hide. I mean, the preacher knew I was selling dope—everybody knew. It was getting me paid and I was like, fuck it, a regular job ain't paying this much and I ain't got to be dealing with no boss. I'm my own boss on the streets."

Snoop says he was also affiliated with the gang element of street life. "I really don't even say I was involved with no gang as far as Crips or Bloods," he states. "I was associated because that's my surroundings. That's what I was brought up with and that was just me."

However, Snoop is critical of the gang violence in Long Beach, a violence so deadly he insists that we cannot conduct any of this interview there, even though this anniversary weekend is allegedly devoted to gang unity. "It's Crip on Crip out there in my neighborhood," he says. "I hope they wake up and smell the real flavor and see there ain't no positiveness in killing each other. I wouldn't want to chance me and you being out there doing an interview, youknowhumsayin', and somebody come at me wicked and either I have to let off on them or they have to let off on me." But there is an up side to gang life. "Niggas will do anything for you: do time for you, take a bullet for you, kill somebody for you. You can find that kind of love on the streets."

Snoop was arrested for drug peddling only 30 days after his graduation from Long Beach Polytechnic high school. Over the next three years he would be in and out of counry jails on three separate occasions. It was the time



MY NAME IS THE KEY TO MY LIFE, HE SAYS. I DON'T LIKE NOBODY SNOOPIN' ON ME—I SNOOP ON THEM.

behind bars that changed his focus.

"That was the key to my whole life," he says, leaning back as if considering where his other options might have led him. "I was always good at rap, but I never really had no study habits because I didn't think nobody would put no money into me or see my talent—my true talent." That talent had been there all along. Snoop's interest in rap dates back to its early days and a song called "Super Rhymes." He memorized the lyrics and performed them for classmates, even taking credit for the song. As admiration for his rhyming skills grew, he abandoned the plagiarism and created his own songs.

Throughout his hustling days, Snoop maintained his interest in rap, closely monitoring the careers of N.W.A, Eric B. & Rakim, and his all-time favorite rapper, Slick Rick. The parallels between Rick and Snoop are particularly clear: both have unusual voices and rhyme styles that have helped to redirect hip hop, both tell stories—serious and comical—about the urban milieu, and both are young black men who have been incarcerated.

Once he was out of jail, Snoop produced several underground tapes in hopes of getting a record deal. One was passed on to Dr. Dre by Snoop's homie Warren G, also a resident of Long Beach and Dr. Dre's brother. Snoop and Dre connected in early 1990, and Snoop was invited to sit through the recording of N.W.A's *Efil4zaggin* album. Broke and unemployed but determined to make it as a rapper, Snoop suffered tremendously during this period—borrowing money, being fed by friends, sleeping on whatever couch was available. "Shit, I was doing bad, man. That's what you call paying dues, you know? But that's the shit I had to go through after I gave up selling dope. I told myself I had to be right in life and when you say that, you've got to give up everything that's negative."

While he was living with an aunt on the East Side, Snoop signed a 90-day record deal, but it wasn't the kind of rap he was interested in doing. "I didn't want to be no R&B rapper and no motherfuckin' crossover rapper," he says. "I don't want to be wearing no flat-tops and all that other R&B-ass shit. That ain't me. I want my shit to be 100% gangsta shit."

Snoop's patience paid off. With the disintegration of N.W.A following the dispute between Dre and Eazy-E, the door was opened for the haunting "Deep Cover," which introduced a nation of rap fans to Snoop Doggy Dogg. Like Ice-T's "Cop Killer," "Deep Cover" attacked crooked police, but not too many people picked up on the song's slippery lyrics. "Murder of an undercover cop," Snoop says, his face crinkled into a mischievous smile as he explains the meaning of the police code number that served as the song's hook. "We was hollerin' that shit all on TV, '1-8-7 on a undercover cop.' If they would have went in-depth on that song, there would have been some shit out of that. But it's the way we put it down."

Snoop's performance on *The Chronic*, especially on "Nuthin' But a 'G' Thang," "Dre Day," and "Lil' Ghetto Boy," only solidified his status as hip-hop-vocalist-meets-gun-toting-renegade in the tradition of rebel artists as diverse as John Coltrane, Jimi Hendrix, and Bob Marley. "'G' Thang" has to be the hardest top-five hit in pop-music history, its unfettered melodies and cocksure lyrics doing for black boys what Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" did for the long-haired grunge crowd: providing a naughty anthem for a subgroup with a constantly changing self-definition. For Snoop's audience, that definition suddenly included the word "gangsta."

By Snoop's reasoning, "a gangsta runs his own thang. He's got his own mentality, he's his own gang, he don't listen to nobody but himself. And he programs himself around being intelligent and staying above the rest of the competition out there."

"Would you describe yourself as a gangsta?" I ask. He smiles wickedly. "Oh, I'd like to say I'm a smooth macadamian."

Snoop and Daz are sitting in a corner of the studio, bobbing their heads in unison to Dre's track. A dwarf in comparison to the lanky Snoop, Daz nevertheless has Snoop's respect and freely offers revisions to the lyrics Snoop is mouthing. Because of the unprecedented success of *The Chronic* and the tremendous potential of *Doggy Style*, concern has been raised about Snoop's lyrics, particularly his frequent use of the word "bitch." Not anticipating getting called on this issue, he answers weakly: "I don't call a woman a bitch until I feel that she's a bitch," and justifies his use of the word as "studio work."

I think back to his comments about his mother, particularly the gratitude he feels toward her for all the support she's given him. The question begs itself: Are all black women "bitches" except our mothers? Later Snoop would, like a child feeling cornered, feebly respond, "It's just a word, you know, that you grew up with. It's some shit that's hard to shake."

Given the paucity of role models and leaders in the black community, it is now a foregone conclusion that rappers are the voice of youth and, as such, have the potential to mold opinion. Snoop, like too few black boys before him, has managed to survive and represents something real, something doable to ghetto youth trapped in inner cities across America. The challenge for someone of Snoop's stature is in understanding who he himself is and how his past binds him to his core listeners; to use his lyrics not merely to tell stories but to offer other possibilities, other definitions. It won't be enough for Snoop to say he has "skills like a motherfucker" if those skills prompt more young men to kill each other or to disrespect and abuse women.

Rap, in Snoop's opinion, shows "that a lot of kids are trying to do something positive. Young niggas was killing each other and they was getting a lot of media hype. Now you're getting a lot of media hype because there's a lot of black teens that are doing rap. So, which sounds better to you?"

Actually, it might sound better if rap were truly the great liberator it claims to be. Individual freedom (in the way of money in the pocket, groupies, etc.) does not equal community uplift. But perhaps that's going too far ahead of the game. Brothers like Snoop just want to get paid, be able to move their mothers out of the ghetto, and have a nice car and a nice home. Snoop says that given the chance to live his life differently, he might've even gone to *junior* college, unaware that that option in and of itself shows the limitations of a black boy's dreams, if there are any dreams to be had at all.

Snoop knows the kind of stories he wants to tell. Real stories, violent stories, misogynistic stories, stories that have no beginning, no middle, no end...they just are.

There's a song on Snoop's debut album called "Who Am I?"—a smoothed-out track with a chorus of female vocals passionately harmonizing his name. Snoop sits in a corner rocking back and forth, still mouthing lyrics for another song with Daz as the crowded studio bops to the groove. "Motherfuckers be trippin' off me, but I be trippin' off of them," Snoop says, whimsically, of his growing legion of admirers. It surprises him, all the hoopla, and Snoop claims he didn't know about the buzz until interviewers told him it was so. Perhaps he really is that focused, that unconcerned about fame and women. Perhaps his life and hip hop music are one and the same, on-edge, provocative, challenging, yet still limited by their particular worldviews.

Much of Snoop's life has been a reaction to external forces: the instability of his family, the poverty and crime and gang life in his neighborhood, his years spent on the streets hustling drugs to survive. Hip hop has afforded him a path out—not only a way to make money, as he puts it, but also the means to define himself, for once. Snoop is adamant about asserting his independence at last. "I demand my respect," he says. "Every move I make is for me and I'm a man, so can't no man tell me how to make my moves in life."

Some apparently think otherwise. In recent months, numerous rumors of Snoop's death either by murder or drug overdose have filtered through the streets. Some people have gone so far as to call Snoop's grandmother and announce his death to her.

Still obviously uncomfortable with his new celebrity status, Snoop grudgingly admits these rumors are probably fueled by simple jealousy. "I don't want to think like that, but I have to, 'cuz it's like that sometimes," he says, his facial expression blank, unfazed by the thought of dying young.

Frankly, the imminence of death is in Snoop's head every day. One can imagine him scanning local newscasts filled with reports of homies dead from street violence. "Yeah," he mumbles in another direction, "it's on my mind heavily 'cuz I lost a lot of homeboys at an early age...." And he doesn't complete the thought because he is tired of reacting. Snoop really wants to believe he can finally make his own moves without others dictating his steps.

"I ain't dead," he says defiantly, his long body again bent toward the tape recorder as if the machine were broadcasting his words straight to the streets. "I'm still breathing. Stop trying to mark me dead before it's my time."



ALWAYS

RUGGED

ALWAYS
Coca-Cola

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AMONG HER

own kind, Sanga was considered a daughtet of the minotaur, a descendant of the bull-god. Among the Europeans she was considered a datk angel of the high trapeze. Bettina, the Aftican she'd taken for a lovet, claimed she was botn in Mali but taised mostly in Patis and Berlin. At night Bettina talked to Sanga about the stats as if she too had once lived among them. Told her about Sirius A and its invisible twin shadow, Sitius B. Sanga was amused.

Though they shared the same color skin she sometimes thought she had mote in common with the Europeans than she did with Bettina. The alienation that brought them togethet also made them tealize just how different their ancestral customs were. Where Sanga came from, men expected you to look through them when you held conversation, tell them what was swimming through their souls. Whete Bettina hailed ftom, women were expected to keep their witchery to themselves.

Every woman has her own Middle Passage to survive, that petiod between late girlhood and womanhood when the body dares the mind to keep up with the rate and number of transfotmations. Sanga knew she was not long of this earth not of the body which she'd fallen to our mother's otbit in. She was fast approaching the time when The Change was going to come. Like all women of her species, she anxiously awaited initiation, wondeting whether the ritual's end would find het in ascent to the stars ot chained to the earth, bound until death to het mortal coil.

Bettina had never wanted the crowds to laugh with het. Any fool could accomplish that trick. All it requited was making a spectacle of yourself or someone else. Getting them to laugh *at* you, now there was a Herculean chore. It required an utter lack nf self-consciousness on the one hand, and on the other, breaching the audience's defenses, decorum, ptopriety, and good taste. To Bettina, becoming a clown was akin to becoming a Buddhist monk, tejecting the wotld's illusions fot the souls. Every time she put on the gteasepaint she became responsible fot channeling a spitit back to earth undet those floodlights. Clowning was Bettina's form of prayer, her crossroads to a state of possession. It was the only profession in the Western world in which she could get paid for doing the work of her ancestors.

Until Bettina fell in love with Sanga, she thought het life's purpose was clear, defined, inviolable. Sanga was a brilliant attist in a company of brilliance, but Bettina knew Sanga was on some othet shit. Bettina's awe fot Sanga's magic thtew Bettina off course. She felt out of control, like Sanga had uptooted her station, taken command of het destination, derailed her train of thought. Her work suffeted as a consequence, became mote wotklike and meaningless to het. Bettina knew she was heading fot a bteakup, but felt like she had nowhere to go except where Sanga directed her wteckage to go.

Sanga practiced levitation before she went to sleep at night. Sometimes she slept in a levitated state. She begged Bettina to go into fteefall with het. Not just fot the sex, which she promised would be phenomenal, but so Bettina might expetience weightlessness without going into a ttance ot escaping the pull of the eatth. Bettina refused het with a fury that suggested she was asked to transgress a moral code. In fact, Bettina believed that Sanga would steal het soul, spitit het away completely, if she ever surrendered to the alien's powers over gravity. Sanga's irresponse to this was to spend the night hoveting over Bettina while she tried to sleep. Often she'd peek up to see the woman who ordinarily enchanted het nights floating ovet the bed, her limbs dangling in the ait like a drowned woman's.

Bettina was not undet the big tent but nursing a virus in het trailet the night Sanga fell off the high wite and stopped het fall centimeters before her body hit the ground. The stay of impact was so close that for years afterward folk would swear her body hadn't hit the ground. Sanga pretended to be smashed up when the ttoupe took het to the hospital in the next town. When the ttoupe left, however, she left with them, resuming het routine of perfotmances. Not long after, Sanga's miraculous survival and recovery joined the troupe's stock of legends, lore tepeated for the sake of chattet and quickly dismissed fot outrageous imptobability. More startling to them all was how calmly Bettina had taken news of Sanga's fall. Circus folk lamented, poot Sanga, bewitched by a heartless lovet.

One blood-curdling summer day, Bettina woke up to find the husk of Sanga's old body being sucked out of the toom by the tevetsible fan. What was left was incorporeal and transparent but not lacking for human form and content. Bettina saw every organ, every bone, every blood vessel shted to goassamer dust, meeting the blades of the fan and blowing out into the Betlin motning. She pulled out her scrapbook, worked up some lovely memoties ftom the road, reminiscing all Sanga had told her about how the galaxy was largely composed of invisible dark mattet, condensed pockets of energy whose existence was determined only by the immense spaces they occupied between the imaginary and the observable.

AFTER ALL THE CLOWNS HAVE GONE TO BED

Fiction by Greg Tate *Fashion by Byron Lars*
Photographs by Ruven Afanador











BYRON LARGE

Greg Tate *talks to fashion's black star-child Byron Lars.*

Byron Lars looks like a jock Yo. Even up on stilts Yo, like a jock with homeboy tendencies. Since world-class fashion designers can dress however they damn well please, you can't say Lars doesn't look like a man who does haute couture. Just because he favors tank tops, bandannas, or backspun baseball caps and Levi's for his daily uniform? Get a grip Yo, this is the '90s. All the same, Lars might not seem like the brother you'd roll up on and say, "Word black, you the man whose designs sell straight out the shop to Bloomies, Saks Fifth Avenue, I. Magnin, and Macy's, right? You the blood whose collections fashion critics regularly give mad props and column inches to alongside those of Bill Blass, Geoffrey Beene, Norma Kamali, and Donna Karan? You're only 28 out of Oakland, California, ain't even been on the international runway scene but three years and you wrekin' shop like that? Word up? That's you?" That's Byron Lars Yo. But then so is the chill and muscular chap with the movie-star grin who kicked it to me lovely about his suggestively sadomasochistic Heidi collection of last winter, his constructive origins in dad's garage, his formative memories of the circus, and other matters weighing on the head of the white fashion club's first black starchile since Patrick Kelly. You are here.

How did it feel being up on those stilts? Did it fill you with a sense of majesty and power, grace and glory?
It just felt cool being tall. It reminded me of when the models put on their heels during the collections and they're like, *hello down there.* I didn't feel like his lordship or anything. I felt more like a jester with the headdress and the clowny hands.

Did you ever want to run away and join the circus?
I never did, but my earliest circus experience was when I was about four. My mom took me—and I can't believe I'm telling this story because usually I'm like, *Mom, you wanna shut up?*—and she thought, this is kind of a weird kid, because I wasn't laughing and screaming like the other kids. I was just soaking in all the images that were happening simultaneously. Nothing was really funny anyway. The circus is not funny. For a kid it's more scary than funny. But, in any case, I was really into it and I came home and drew the whole thing.

When you came into an appreciation of fashion, was it the fantasy aspect that appealed to you?
Naw, absolutely not. It actually came from an interest in construction and building things. I wanted to be an architect, then I learned to sew, and then I just started making clothes. It's very much the same sensibility: You have to make something that works and functions in a person's life and you try to make it beautiful the best way you can. Of course, I did get wrapped up in the fantasy thing as I began to work. Once you realize you can make *anything* out of shapes of paper cut into fabric, it takes a long time before you get over that concept.

When you're designing is there a body type or personality you have in mind?
As far as an ideal woman for my clothes? I don't have one. Some people say long-legged and blond, that's it. But there is no "it." I want different people to wear my clothes. That's why the last collection, which was this Heidi trip, was multiracial. People might think I'd be using a lot of blond models with pigtails but in actuality Heidi can be attitude. So we had Rasta Heidi and Heidi Chang.

Where is the soul in fashion for you? Where's the emotional core?
The soul of it is building it, taking it from paper to making it really say something on the body. No matter what gimmicks are going on, there's always a great deal of care that's taken with proportion and construction. If you don't have a trained eye, you might not notice what goes into the clothes, and you shouldn't, because that's my job. It's just a dumb shirt, why does it look so great? A lot of things that make you look great in my shirts as opposed to any old shirt is the time and effort we put into construction.

What's your creative process like?
As far as the theme of a season is concerned, usually in the middle of the present season a recurring motif will come up that has nothing to do with the season you're working on. When we were working on the spring collection there was this model who came up who was way on this Swiss Miss Heidi trip. I don't know what she was on, but she was in that head and everybody focused on her for whatever reason. Didn't mean anything, we were just laughing at her, her poses and everything. Also, I love lodencloth and I always wanted to do something with it. So now you've got a Swiss Miss Heidiesque chick from the last show, you have lodencloth, I love green, it's as simple as that. It's not so much like I found a theme as a theme found me.

With the Heidi collection you definitely played against the cheery Swiss Miss conception. Got some ol' wild black leather things going on there.
We kinda thought, what would happen if this sweet little Bavarian girl came to New York? Heidi in Bavaria is one thing, Heidi in the Bronx is something else. Think of Peter as a bad boy who needs reprimanding. Any time you have a theme there's always a different way to look at it. We all know the story of Heidi, the sweet little courageous girl on the mountaintop. But what if Heidi were a black girl in Jamaica, Queens, you know what I mean? That's where [the model] Roshumba with dreads came from.

Do you feel what's been called "the burden of representation" as a black designer? Like, every time you step out people want you to uphold the mantle of black success in fashion?
That really concerned me in the beginning, but I gotta tell you, I don't feel as much pressure as I'm sure I would have if I'd been the first. Like Patrick Kelly. He was the first to break all those barriers and all those rules. And having the whole world look at him like a bug in a jar. I think he took the edge off any anxiety I might be experiencing from this. One thing I really like about Patrick Kelly is that he went *way* over the top as far as putting humor in his clothes and it really made people lighten up, you know what I mean? Thanks to him you can get away with a lot of tongue-in-cheek stuff. As far as being courageous, he and Jean-Paul Gaultier have been my inspirations.

Who was the most important person as far as your personal development goes?
I'd have to say my dad. He comes from the South, doesn't have anything above a high school education, and he's a construction worker. The very fact that he even supported me in something like fashion for God's sake...! First I wanted to be an architect. I didn't see the connection at first, but it's such a typical story: so many fashion designers have architectural roots. Then I was like, how do I tell my folks that I don't want to make buildings, I want to make dresses? You know what I mean? I'm going to tell my *father* this? But they saw the writing on the wall. A lot of times in high school I wouldn't even go out from trying new things on my little secondhand sewing machine. But my father was supportive of me in every way. Not that my mother wasn't, because she certainly was, but my father was always the one to make sure when I was a kid that the garage was stocked with wire, nails, wood, and a saw that I could use. All that stuff really cultivated me creatively to even reach and make it to this point. He was a great source of inspiration, a very enlightened man.

Where does the edge and the bent toward irony in your work come from?
I think that's just a matter of personal taste. Some people tend to be refined and others tend to be bent. But I don't even see the stuff as being all that bent. To me, it's what just seems so natural, normal even. I'm always attracted to that model whose mouth is maybe a little too big and with a hat that's maybe a little too big but that seems just right. I mean, I'm not even striving to be so avant-garde or so, *"watch this"*. For so long fashion was my hobby. I'd take a regular job in fashion, like cutting fabric all day so I could come home and make my own stuff. Now that it's a part of my everyday life, I realize my work is my playtime. Now I have to start looking for something else to do. I was thinking about taking a sculpture class or something. But it'll probably relate back to this. I mean, this is my *life.*

Fashion designer **Byron Lars**, wearing Fernando Sanchez, is the architect of well-made whimsy. *These pages*: Makeup, Alberto Fava for Gil Gamlieli Salon. Hair, Rolando Beauchamp for Dora, Martyn Foss Calder. Prop Stylist, Jocelyn Beaudoin. Models, Lois Samuels, Christie Denham/BETHANN Management; opposite page, Kumi. All clothing by Byron Lars.









CORNEL U.

Brother West, the hottest black academic in America, is acting out the role that's been written for Malcolm X since his death.

by James Ledbetter

I first encountered Cornel West in 1986, during weekly Monday-night installments requiring frigid uphill walks to the Yale Divinity School. He was teaching a class in 20th-century Marxism and, to everyone's shock, he was spellbinding. Not before or since have I heard anyone explain so clearly some of the most opaque political writers of all time. West's gestures echoed those of a Baptist preacher (his grandfather was an ordained minister), adorning his orations with movement bordering on frenzy. Then, as now, he could become so animated that his thin frame was transformed into a blur of arm-waving, knee-bending, and righteous shouting.

Since that time, the 40-year-old West has become perhaps the country's leading black leftist intellectual. In the first half of 1993 alone, he published three books of essays and speeches on topics as diverse as jazz, the black Marxist tradition, and Sly Stone. While West—now a professor of religion at Princeton—is certainly no radical activist, he is in many ways playing out the role posthumously scripted for Malcolm X: namely, a public intellectual who seeks to educate the American black community, to criticize it, but mostly to express its anger. West also realizes that whites and other Americans need to heed the call, and thus spends much of his time working in multiracial coalitions. The task is immense, and there are times when West needs to draw deep into his well-seasoned humanism to meet the demands of his many audiences.

We wanted to know what West thinks about the social and political questions raised by hip hop, so we caught up with him in New York while he was touring to promote *Race Matters*, his best-selling book published earlier this year by Beacon Press. Wearing a trademark dark three-piece suit, with black-and-gold cufflinks bearing a silhouette of Africa, West discussed everything from Chuck D to Michael Jackson to the future of pragmatic thought. Here are the highlights of our talk.

In some of your statements about contemporary black music, you don't deal very often with so-called hardcore rap, with artists like Paris, Kool G Rap, Ice Cube. Arguably, these are the performers most strongly identified with the nihilism of which you speak—with the black proletarian experience, with the police brutality, with the despair that comes from neighborhoods ravaged by crime and drugs. What's your opinion of that particular subgenre?

Well, first, there's something that I like about Ice-T and Ice Cube and the so-called gangster rappers. Paris as well. They attempt to do what I attempt to do, as a public intellectual. And that is, to tell the truth. Now, any time when you want to tell the truth it's based on one's own experiences. And also in the truth-telling you're gonna have certain kinds of stylances and certain kinds of blindnesses, certain kinds of biases. Now, I'm deeply critical of misogyny, of the homophobia, of the preoccupation with the machismo identity that is associated oftentimes with violence. I'm very critical of that. But in telling the truth they do, in fact, express these kinds of unjustified sensibilities. Because that's where they're coming from. There's no doubt that there's a very, very powerful critique of white supremacy in the work. And that, to me, is a progressive element. That doesn't justify their refusal to come to terms with male supremacy and homophobia and to talk even more so about the class inequality. But the critique of white supremacy and the concern about what it means to live in poverty and so forth is quite strong.

But are these artists really accessible to a critique?

Well, I think interviews like this are a vehicle. They actually read. I mean, these are serious brothers and sisters, in terms of trying to process, to mature, to develop. They don't want us to remain static and stationary in any way. So you've got a course of internal dialogue going on within the hip hop culture, where you get a variety of different kinds of criticisms of each other. In Arrested Development I think you see both implicitly and explicitly critiques of the kinds of values that gangster rappers invoke in the music. I think that's very good. That's especially so out there among the women rappers, you see. So that kind of internal dialogue, as well as the dialogue of critics from the out-

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDRE LAMBERTSON

side, can make a difference. I think the critique of black patriarchy has had some impact on Public Enemy. Their attempts to respond by singing these songs about revolutionary black women and so forth. And my brother Spike Lee. I mean, that's one of the great lessons of Malcolm X, right? That here's somebody who not only has, you know, the courage to act on one's convictions but the courage, also, to attack one's convictions when those convictions are viewed more and more as impediments for freedom's struggle, you see.

Malcolm grew. Painful, but he grew. And I think when one looks around and sees Spike grappling with these problems, or a Public Enemy grappling with these problems, or anybody else, you have to give them credit. But you also have to continue to push. And I don't think you can push folks by simply throwing stones. You have to affirm what they've already done that is important. You have to criticize what they have yet to do. And then you have to leave yourself open to criticism even as you criticize. In that spirit, it seems to me, we'd be able to move America. But I don't think we can move everybody.

You said in an interview that one of the reasons jazz is so appealing to large numbers of white Americans is precisely that they feel that black humanity is being asserted by artists who do not look at themselves in relation to whites or engage in self-pity or white put-down. To what extent does that active self-expression apply to non-jazz black music today?

I think if you're talking about jazz from a genius like Louis Armstrong to the best that we have now with Wynton Marsalis, you're talking about levels of artistic achievement that soar. And black humanity is taken for granted. Now, I do think that black humanity is taken for granted in non-jazz musical groups. Rhythm and blues, hip hop, and so forth. I think that non-black people do feel that they have access to black humanity most readily in these particular forms. Because, again, the tradition that they've refined in the black community, that the levels of self-confidence and the relative lack of self-doubt are operative. And that's rare. Because white supremacy has played such profound tricks on black people's minds that the struggle with self-doubt, the attempt to hold at bay self-confidence, is much more difficult than in other spheres.

So that I do believe it's music...athletics as well. Because, in fact, we've seen, you know, from Sarah Vaughan to...to Michael Jordan, reaching the highest levels of achievement and accomplishment in these traditions. Then all of a sudden the groups are younger. Hi-Five, Silk. Let alone Boyz II Men. And you say, man, these young brothers have really seriously cultivated the craftsmanship of singing again. Which is, I think, a wonderful thing. And they're some serious artists. But Gerald Levert was, I think, the one figure who towered above the others in terms of sustaining the highest artistic expressions of the deep soul singers. And you got people like Aaron Hall. He's tough.

And then you got somebody like Glenn Jones, you know, I mean, those are major torchbearers of deep soul singing. I'm not just talking about the kind of stuff I do in the shower. This is some serious soul singing. In the same way, my generation, somebody like Charlie Wilson and his brothers, in the Gap Band, from Tulsa, Oklahoma, that's some serious soul singing that you're talking about.

HI-FIVE, SILK, BOYZ II MEN—THESE YOUNG BROTHERS HAVE REALLY CULTIVATED THE CRAFTSMANSHIP OF SINGING AGAIN. I'M NOT TALKING ABOUT THE KIND OF STUFF I DO IN THE SHOWER. THIS IS SOME SERIOUS SOUL SINGING.

In "Black Music and Youth" you talked about the profit-driven need to increase the production pace and numbers of records. And, hence, the reinforcing of fashion, fad, and novelty and the overload of black popular musical talent. This is about as close an approximation as I could find in your writing to the German cultural critic T. W. Adorno's assertion that music today is largely a social cement. That is to say that, despite its antiestablishment stance and the very real debates that it provokes about social issues, hip hop and other popular musical forms in fact serve to perpetuate and legitimize the market economy and social order it seeks to criticize. Is there any way out of that seeming paradox?

The way Adorno sets it up there's no way out. That's part of the problem. You see, I don't look at it that way. I think that the market itself is a crucial terrain in the struggle for non-market values. The opposition that is always already in the market does, in fact, have impact regarding the possibilities of alternative views, of critiques, of sustaining traditions of resistance. The market for me is a terrain that, in its dominant form, is tilted to status quo. It's tilted to reproducing things as they are. But there's always, within the market itself, oppositional possibilities.

You've discussed in Race Matters *how black popular music and athletics have Afro-Americanized white youth. Can you flesh out this concept a bit?*

You see, Afro-American culture has been able to generate a variety of different styles, especially stylizations of the body over time and space. You walk a certain way, you talk a certain way. You gesture a certain way. You speak rhythmically. And all of these are various forms of resistance in a society that has degraded your body because you got the wrong nose, because you got the wrong lips, you got the wrong hips, and so forth. And style, as we know, is a certain way of being in the world. And to affirm one's way of being in the world for a people whose body itself has been so thoroughly degraded and told they're nobody is to create various stylizations of the body to assert they are somebody. And so one sees these various styles manifested in the streets, in the music. And those styles have been disproportionately influential among young white girls and boys. Teenagers across the board, you see. The music goes hand in hand with it. But it's the styles as well that we don't want to lose track of. The question then becomes, well, what is attractive about these styles?

Good question.

Yeah. Why is it associated with being cool? Why is it associated with being hip? Why is it associated with being able to feel sure of oneself? I think James Brown's category of feeling sure of oneself is a fundamental category. Because it has to do with not just self-respect, but with the ability to affirm oneself. Well, when we look at the larger society we see young people growing up who are deeply disoriented. Who are deeply dislocated. Who are rootless. Who are deracinated and who also are in quest of feeling sure of themselves as white, or brown. Or Asian. And there is not a youth culture out there that provides them with these resources of feeling sure of themselves that is separate in any way from these black cultural products. And so you find it's not a majority, but there are vast numbers of white youth who, in order to feel sure of themselves [adopt these styles].

And this is very different from skill acquisition. See, that's not associated with black folk. You can have white youth involved in so-called intellectual matters that are severed from the social and the cultural skills. And so you can see this kind of schizophrenia at work. This is also true for black kids. You see, because the skill acquisition is not cool, it can easily be translated to becoming a white thing. Which I think is silly and foolish but it is understandable. But for white youths, they're set with skill acquisition, but when they look at various sources of feeling sure of themselves they fall back on black stylizations of body, black stylizations of time and space. And begin to imitate, begin to emulate.

Now, again, unfortunately, oftentimes the nerd and the square are associated with skill acquisition. A's in school, debate club, and so forth. That's something that I'm quite critical of. I like to think of the tradition of Duke Ellington or Count Basie or Billie Holiday in which cool actually embraces all of this. So that we don't have this kind of dichotomy. If you get the A's, you can play the violin and you can sing like Luther and you can still play basketball. And that's kind of the description of my own life. But it's difficult to pull off. I think, for example, of my class at Harvard that arrived and most of us had these styles but we were still able to move on, engage in skill acquisition. And, hence, end up the kind of cultural hybrids that we are.

You've mentioned the notion of role-playing and masks in the black tradition spilling over into hip hop. How significant is that in terms of setting up a model for black listeners or white listeners?

LeRoi Jones pointed this out, I think, with great insight in *Blues People*, which is still such a classic. Talked about two different features. One is the sense of pageantry, the sense of the performative, the sense of the histrionic, and the sense of the theatrical. And you do have this very much in the Afro-American culture. You see it in evetyday life, as well as on the stage. A sense of dramatizing one's self-presentation. Preaching is one of the great examples of this. But also, the way in which brothers are interacting in the barber shop, or the sisters interacting in the



the new album.

produced by jimmy jam & terry lewis and janet jackson.
one track produced by janet jackson and jellybean johnson.

Virgin jdj

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beauty salon. There is always this very dramatic dimension that goes hand in hand with how one presents oneself. I think it's no accident that once it's married with market strategies, you get a role-playing and a mask-wearing that is quite seductive, because black folk are so good at it.

Now, there is another element to keep in mind here, and that is that black people have to function in so many different worlds. You've got Du Bois's notion of double consciousness; moving from one world to another; speaking different languages in the white world and the black world, in different portions of the black world, and different portions of the white world. Black people become thoroughly multicontextual, which requires mask-wearing. You think of Paul Laurence Dunbar's great poem: "We wear the mask." And he talks about how you put on a certain mask in the white world, so that the white world really has no access to who you may actually be.

Now, in addition to that, though, LeRoi Jones goes on to make the point of what he calls the deification of accident, which is this sense of wanting to go to the edge of the cliff, and then start walking on a tightrope. It's like Marvin Gaye. The whole history of black falsetto singing is, in part, an attempt to go as far as you can go, and see how high you can go. See, it ups the ante. It makes it more dramatic, you know, like the Teddy Mills of Blue Magic, or L.J. Reynolds, you know, or Ron Banks of the Dramatics. Or Eddie Kendricks of the Temptations. He's going to go as high as he can go. When is he going to break? He can't keep going. He just keeps going up there.

That's one thing I noticed about radio stations these days that's very upsetting. They're very different from when I was growing up. What distinguished black radio stations from white radio stations was that the black radio stations always played the record all the way through. And the reason was because at the very end of the record, all hell's breaking loose. They're taking all the risks, they're going off. Because in the middle of the record, they're in control, you see. And at the very end...*waaah!* They're going off. And black people would wait to listen to the end. But the white radio station is cutting it off two-thirds of the way through. They think the record is...is over, just because two-thirds of the record is over, you see? Now you've got black radio stations that cut the darn records off the way white radio stations do. So I'll call these record stations up. I say, "Play the whole damn record."

In your review of Cedric Robinson's Black Marxism: The Making of a Black Radical Tradition, *you talked about the tension between traditional Marxist thought and the experience of Afro-Americans, which doesn't fit so neatly into the categories of European Marxist analysis. You seem to think that some kind of modified Marxist theory is the most appropriate approach. But today, most American black intellectuals, or black radicals, even, opt instead for a nationalist or Afrocentric view, in varying degrees of sophistication. Is that a situation that you would seek to change?*

Well, I would definitely seek to change it. I do believe that black national traditions—as diverse as they are—do have a variety of different insights: the crucial role of culture, and the self-love and self-respect and self-esteem. And the black nationalists rightly highlight the degree to which you can't talk about being in a black body, and then at the same time not having to deal with these assaults.

YOU CAN HAVE ALL THE BLACK NATIONALISM YOU WANT, YOU CAN HAVE ALL THE BLACK SELF-LOVE YOU WANT. BUT WE'RE STILL GOING TO HAVE BLACK POVERTY UNLESS YOU COME TO TERMS WITH THE DISTRIBUTION OF WEALTH AND POWER IN THE SOCIETY AND IN THE WORLD.

But the reason why I think the Marxist tradition is still important is that you do have to deal with the fact that it's a capitalist society, and a global economy that's driven by profit-maximizing. And you've got corporate and bank elites who have a disproportionate amount of wealth and power. If you essentially talk about black freedom, let alone freedom for working people, poor people as a whole, then you have to keep track of the activities of these elites. You can have all the black nationalism you want, you can have all the black self-love you want. But we're still going to have black poverty unless you come to terms with the distribution of wealth and power in this society and in the world.

In writing about Toni Morrison, you said, in what I think is a beautiful passage: "Beloved *can be construed as bringing together the loving yet critical affirmation of black humanity found in the best of black nationalist movements, the perennial hope against hope for trans-racial coalition in progressive movements, and the painful struggle for self-affirming sanity in a history in which the nihilistic threat* seems *insurmountable." Do you see any such unifying moments in today's hip hop?*

Hmm, good question. That's interesting that you picked that up, though. That's one of the few passages I'm really proud of. In hip hop...I don't know. My hunch is that there would be moments in Arrested Development where I find that. Because, you see, it has to be a group that has a deep organic link to the black culture and black community. It can't be simply a kind of universalistic statement that doesn't have grounding and anchoring in the black cultural tradition. And Toni has that organic grounding. Arrested Development has that organic grounding. And therefore they're able to build with the best of black nationalism, and also a whole lot of possibility for a transracial or multiracial alliance.

One thing I like about Toni's work is that it's critical of religion as it affirms spirituality. And I think that's true for Speech and company too, that they're engaged with religion. They know that there is a depth of spirituality in this tradition that has gone moribund, that must be recovered if we're going to have any serious movement. Because the people who have been so thoroughly hated and haunted and degraded and despised have to fall back on spiritual resource in order to affirm themselves as human beings before we can get anything political off the ground. Now, I must say that for me, growing up, I found it in Sly Stone. I think that it's no accident that they tend to fall back on Sly. Because Sly was one of the first who represented, for me, this kind of deep organic link with the black community, but with an explicitly open humanistic outlook.

But it wasn't a kind of cheap humanistic outlook that you get from some black folk, who really hide and conceal an obsession of whiteness. And that's always a danger among a degraded people, that you get your highly assimilated elements who are talking about universalism. And that universalism really doesn't fundamentally embrace their own tradition. They're talking about chasing after somebody else's tradition. Now, I'm a thoroughgoing universalist. But like Sly, like Arrested Development, it's got to be grounded in whence I come, even though it is critical of elements of my tradition. Or there is a risk of me simply going universalist in whiteface as a black person.

I think that's part of the problem with Brother Michael Jackson. You know, here, on the one hand, we have one of the greatest entertainers in the history of entertainment. Comes out of a very undeniable black working-class background in Gary, Indiana. Who is organically linked. I mean, you hear young Michael singing "Who's Lovin' You"...that brother, he is as organic as James or Aretha. But at the same time, as he goes mainstream, he begins to articulate ideals that we all share. We all want to be human beings, you know, we don't just want to be viewed as carriers of a certain kind of epidermal, right? But how you articulate that can easily be severed from that same tradition that enabled you to be here.

One thing about Michael that I like is that he has a level of sincerity that people don't really know about. He can get into his own kind of mask-wearing and role-playing. But deep in his heart, he's got a deep sincerity that is one of sensitivity and love. And that's real, I think. Have you ever been to a Michael Jackson concert? I went to his concert when he was 10 years old. And it was one of the finest performances of a young person.

But I went to see him out at the Meadowlands about four years ago. And I'll tell you, it is a transcendent experience. Given all of the gigantism, he still comes through. He's on for about two and a half hours, and he's got the same intensity as James, in terms of wanting to reach the audience. He's not as effective in terms of creating the connection that James Brown was able to do in the '60s. But he comes closer than anybody else. And then, at the end, when he sings "Man in the Mirror," it goes dark, and everybody's got a candle. There are tears coming down, and they're not all crocodile. Some of them are. But not all. It's a moment of transcendence. It really is.

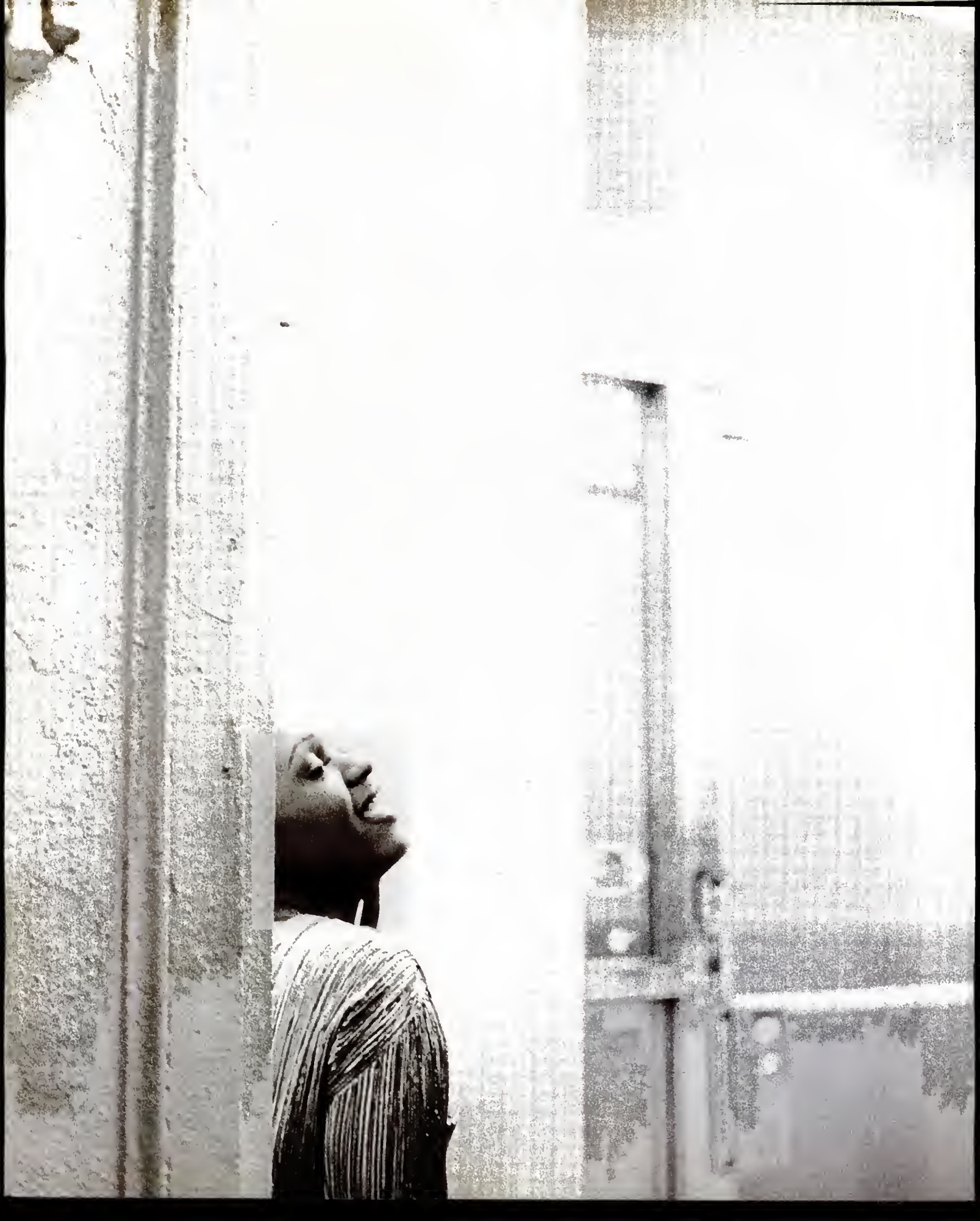
James Ledbetter is a staff writer at *The Village Voice*, where he covers media and politics.



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MACY'S



ULTRA WOMAN

ULTRA AND THE SWAMP There she is. The super-contemporary Ultra Naté with two eyes—*swock!*—like tiny black umbrellas opened—*swock!*—in a brown field complete with lips—*mmwah!*—and anything else a baby diva needs to support and...compliment! her super-contemporary plastic (vinyl) vest and plastic (vinyl) cap and boots on this night, the night Ultra *hangs* with her two girlfriends, who are riding in Ultra's super-contemporary car through the soft, not to say swampish, Baltimore night, a night like no other, this being Saturday, Ultra's night to hang in...Baltimore! Which is like some wild, neoned-out swamp of a town, not unlike a town seen in a '50s B-movie, complete with mom and her apron, a monster, some green scaled creature reeking havoc as it breathed fire, walking toward... what?

What does it matter? Especially if one is with Ultra! Naté!, the baby diva from Baltimore whose debut, *Blue Notes in the Basement* is that rare animal: a well- thought-out dance *album*. ("I was real sad then," Ultra says of her first solo effort, her baby lips—*mmwah!*—almost plum black, with Max Factor, perhaps, and contrition.)

Blue Notes spawned the top 10 dance hit "Rejoicing" and one or two other dance-floor favorites, making Ultra the latest in a line of girls (beginning with Diana) who puckered—*mmwah!*—on TV in chiffon and hair and eyes—*swock!*—too tired to give attitude, being a handmaiden of soul and all that. Like Denise "Neicy" Williams and all her pain and high-pitched *free*dom. Ultra belongs to that tradition, a tradition that may spawn a few more hits, a few more tours of Japan, where Ultra's a favorite (Ultra says, "Japan was great! They kept giving us all these free presents!"), eventually winding down to...what?

What does it matter when you've got your car and your girls, the combined effect of whose hair equals some like crazy, like scraggly, wild kind of monster wheeling through the soft Baltimore nights, murmuring "Uh- huh" to almost anything Ultra has to say. Because in Baltimore, Ultra is a diva, what with her super-contemporary super shorts, and fishnets and whatnot, and plastic clothes, and then her *chillun*, the girls in the back of the car with their Soul II Soul braids and Dynel curls and day jobs, working for Ultra on the side as back-up dancers. What could be better? The gum going like mad—*snap!*—as Ultra blasts her latest album, *One Woman's Insanity*, in the car deck as she rolls toward...what?

What can it matter? On this soft, not to say swampish, Baltimore night, Ultra's got her look totally together. So much so that she says, "They are definitely not ready for what the children have on tonight," a statement that may or may not include Ultra's *girls*, who are wearing a version of Baltimore grunge they themselves might not be ready for, what with their macramé maxi vests and dungaree bell-bottoms and rusty heels hanging out of those platforms manufactured by some sartorial slob in the Andes or Flatbush and purple eyeshadow and Fabulash lids fanning up and down—*swock!*—as they take in the soft Baltimore night and Ultra's voice, slightly siddified for the interview, sort of Btyn Mawr by way of Baltimore. Baltimore! It's where Ultra feels like...herself. "Why should I move to The City?" she asks of no one in particular in the back seat of her car, her girls, stroking hair, murmuring "Uh-huh" to anything the world—and Ultra Naté—may have to offer. "Here in Baltimore, you can have some peace of mind, relaxing and whatnot. The City is so much pressure. I've been on my own since I was 18....I lived with my mother before that, who raised me to be independent....You can't have two women run a house, so one of us had to go, so I went....I was gonna be a doctor and studied, but the music kind of took over....I sang in my Mom's church, in the choir, and they're not too thrilled with my singing secular music, so, whatever....I was born in Boston 25 years ago, but I was raised right here in Baltimore....The likelihood of my leaving is small, 'cause the Basement Boys—my producers—are here, my core group is here.... Remember—*uh-huh*—that I sang with a group in high school called Sexy Inspiration...It was a group of five and we covered Five Star songs....Ultra is my God-given name. I never thought my singing would lead to anything like this...here!"

The here to which Ultra is referring, hiking down her shorts, jangling car keys—*pinnng!*—in her left hand, girls to her back, is a community center of sorts, where a dance is being held, deejayed by Ultra's boyfriend. The building is shaped like a Masonic temple. The women waiting in line to enter it or milling about outside, fanning themselves, giving their hair a break from the heat—*thwop!*—or their boyfriends, can't take their eyes off Ultra and her girls and her plastic (vinyl) vest and maybe plastic (vinyl) hat, their eyes not deigning to make reference to the fact that Ultra's left leg is considerably shorter than her right.

ULTRA'S GAME PLAN How does Ultra do it? Here in the city where Billie Holiday was born, with all those K-Marts to the left and hairdos—finger-waved and fried and dyed and chopped and extended and Mason Dixied—and The Block, one city block of sin in a town that shuts down early to allow for its Southern sense of propriety toward almost everything, including Jesus, who, one presumes, has to get up early to do *His* hair and....

All this! Inside the community center, where Ultra's boyfriend—"He isn't exactly my type, which is why the whole relationship is working"—plays reggae, *among* other things, and where one can hear the rayon let rip, as gold chains are adjusted after the drink tickets are bought in one line and people sit out the wait for drinks in kindergarten-like baby chairs in an atmosphere reminiscent of a high school sock-hop scene in one of those B monster movies where lust is manifest in that monster breathing fire through that swampish Baltimore night as one ponders....

All this! How, in the midst of it, does Ultra cope? With her two eyes—*swock!*—centered square in the middle of the dance floor, Ultra surveys the crowd with the acumen of a businesswoman who knows her target audience better than they know themselves, and that this funky gamine with plum-black lips—*mmwah!*—will be the most fabulous, most super-contemporary thing the city has produced in a while, and they should support it. Ultra's an institution.

Like a general, like MacArthur, surveying future sales in a sea of brown faces unaware that Ultra's been to Japan and all that and Italy and all that and now, in surveying these men, so beautiful, so untroubled, as they are, by thought, she sees *how* the album sales will rack up, she *hears* her plaintive voice on their car stereos as these guys recline in seats (bucket) to caress hair, potentially their girls' natural weave (right!) as Ultra tells them what a woman wants as they....

ULTRA'S PARADOX *"WHAAAAAT?"* says the proprietor of The Paradox, Ultra's hang of choice, two or three hours after Ultra has lost those guys back there in the *country*, those guys who've said things to Ultra like, "I *know* I've got to get to the Paradox with you one night, Miss Thing." And about whom Ultra has said, "Here comes Miss so-and-so. One of those *countryass* chillun," and so forth, Ultra being somewhat *out* of Baltimore in theoty, having been to Japan and Italy and all that, and learning how *not* to pronounce brother like this: "bruver," and so on. Well Ultra's lost all of them now as she winds her way to...The Paradox, which is situated near some railroad tracks and garbage and seems fairly ominous for Baltimore, home of the crab and a bay and pastel colors.

"Whaaat?" says the proprietor, taking Ultra's plastic (vinyl) in. "Here comes the big star," he says, embracing Ultra's tiny frame, a frame made tinier still in this creepy dark, the dark that announces something is about to happen in that B-movie again, which rolls on and on and this night rolls on and on.

"I've been coming here for years," Ultra says. "If I'm not here, then I'm out of town."

The here to which Ultra is referring is a large cavern-like space—The Paradox! Yum!—with a basketball court, juice bar, and two or three or six drag queens in nasty wigs, white lace skirts, and overalls. Ultra stands somewhat to the left of this. In the crowd but a little apart. Ultra says, "I wish my girls was here." Ultra says, "I wish the music was better," as she climbs into the DJ booth to make a few suggestions. Ultra dances. As she dances, she does not remove one piece of vinyl or her eyes from her audience's eyes—*swock!*—taking the super-contemporaty Ultra Naté in.

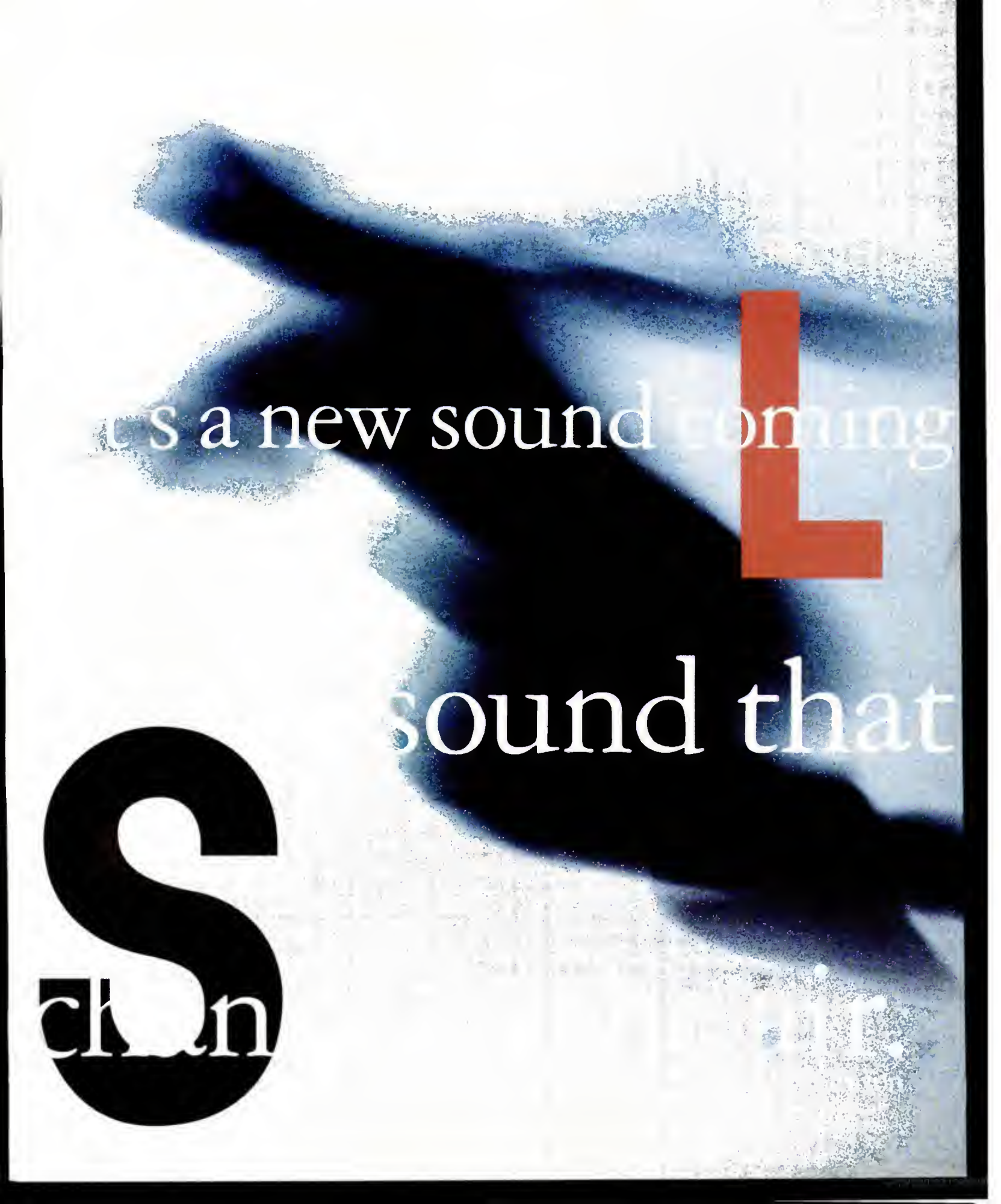
Ultra says, "I know if this record flops, I've gotta get out of Baltimore. There are too many people who want Ultra to fail."

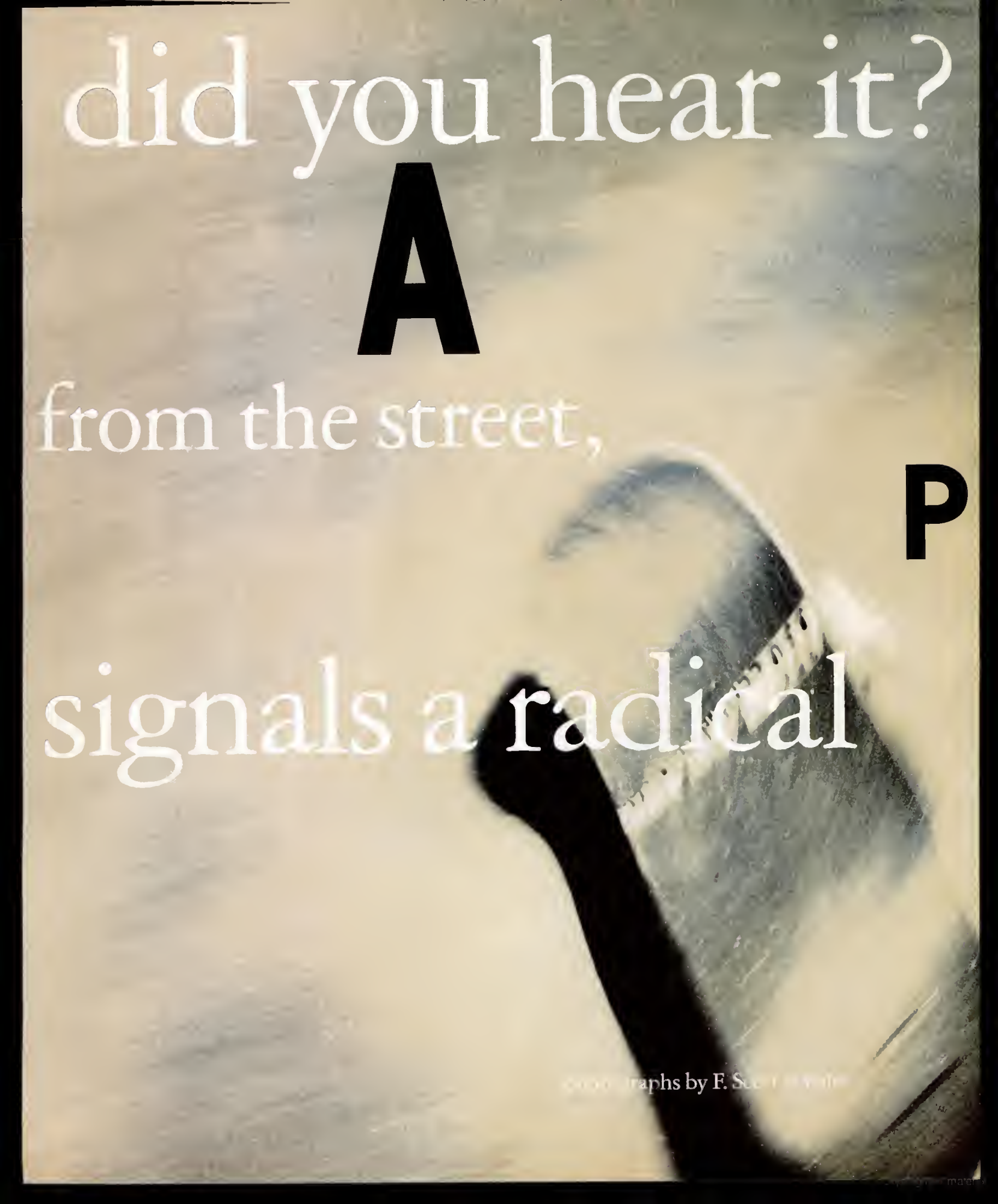
Ultra knows she will be embraced moments before Something Else will happen, which is...what?

Ultra getting into her car, driving away from the Paradox, shortly before dawn, wetting her lips—*mmwah!*—as she considers getting up for church at three o'clock, for her church's Homecoming Day, which will happen *after* she's offered her out-of-town guest some green Kool-Aid in her actual home, whose decor is comprised of brown wicker fans nailed to the wall, a fireplace, and many, many photographs of Ultra Naté not looking like Ultra Naté, looking like no other living woman.

PHOTOGRAPH ERIC JOHNSON JACKET JUSARA LEE. HAIR ORLANDO PITA FOR BUMBLE + BUMBLE. MAKEUP JOE J. SIMON

Roaming Baltimore's savage land with R&B's baby diva, Ultra Naté by Hilton Als


s a new sound
sound that


did you hear it?
A
from the street,
P
signals a radical
raphs by F. Sc

You couldn't help but hear the impact. Here on the streets of downtown San Francisco, beneath the towering skyscrapers, where the sun appears only in glimpses, in an abandoned concrete plaza, how could you not hear it? Street kids—skateboarding kids—were risking great bodily harm, pounding the pavement, jumping off steps, taking this barren urban terrain and creating something new, something beautiful. Something revolutionary.

On one October afternoon three years ago, they sure heard it. Goosh, *goosh*, SLAP, zzzzzz, *SMACK*, "aaaaaaaaaaaaAA" *SSLAP!!!* And in case anyone missed it, there were cheers that followed, loud cheers. It was the sound of a skateboarding legend being born. Mark Gonzales had pulled off a stunt thought impossible: He ran hard toward a familiar 10-foot drop to a set of concrete stairs, jumped on his skateboard as he threw it down, then *kicked* the tail at the very last minute, sending it airborne just as he hit the edge. He sailed through the air—over the stairs—to land safely on his board, 10 feet below and about 30 feet forward.

It was as if he'd lifted the spirits of the skaters as he flew through the air, carried them all on his shoulders on top of his untucked T-shirt and the baggy XXL shorts hanging to his shins. The trick—a basic "ollie" admittedly, but over an incredible obstacle—would be dissected, and rehashed and retold, the spot renamed simply "Gonz." When he landed, he'd turned skating up yet another notch.

Skateboarding was being taken over by the street. The old style typified by white surfer-dudes in suburban skateboard parks—vertical-ramp and pool skating known simply as Vert—was made obsolete by the creativity of the street. "Vert's dead," say most skaters. "And Street killed it." It's a victoty of urban over suburban. Black over white. New school over old school. Hip hop over punk. Kids on the street, right here in Justin Herman Plaza in the Embarcadero, had dictated the direction of the sport. The final vestiges of hardcore Vert skaters, white punks on dope, were gasping their last breaths.

Then came the winds.

"Freaky devil wind," one skater remembered. "The wind kicks up here every night, but that day, man, I'll never forget it, that was some freaky-ass wind." On October 20, 1990, as the sun set behind the skyscrapers of the Embarcadero, an eerily hot Santa Ana wind seemed as if it could breathe life into the dead.

As it blew across the bay it picked up a small brushfire. The eucalyptus trees that dotted the hillside lit like gigantic matches and as the wind whipped up to 50 miles an hour they were sent airborne, becoming fireballs flying through the sky, exploding as they hit the ground—not unlike a skateboarder making a trick. The fires grew and grew and when finally squelched, they'd destroyed an entire community: 25 people dead, 150 injured, more than 2,500 dwellings on 1,600 acres burnt to the ground, and $5 billion in property destroyed.



Some skaters are known for their tricks. Some for their skate-scars.

Like a phoenix, from the ashes of California's worst fire, the greatest venue in the history of Vert skating arose. But here in the Bay Area—"the Mecca of skateboarding"—were there any Vert skaters left to care?

"We heard about this firestorm happening and all of a sudden this light bulb started going off in our heads," says Eric White, a 23-year-old art student and surfer who's been skating swimming pools since his teens. White is the picture of a suburban college student, with close-cropped hair, khaki shorts, and an untucked rock-band T-shirt. "With all those expensive houses going up in flames, they were bound to leave behind tons of pools." Immediately after the fires were put out, White, along with pool-skating master Royce Nelsen and the rest of the Marin Boys—a posse of Vert skaters from suburban Marin County—descended upon the burnt landscape. While devastated homeowners picked through the wreckage of their once stately homes, the skaters patrolled the ruins for skateable pools. Two years later, amid hyperactive reconstruction, they're still scouting and skating.

To these old-style Vert skaters, Street isn't an option. The sport they learned in the early '80s emphasized power over technique, aggression over style—a direct descendant of skateboarding's first boom in the late 1950s. Back then, California surfers nailed roller-skate wheels to two-by-fours until commercial models showed up in the Frankie Avalon days of 1964. That fad was over by 1969. In 1973, the development of the polyurethane wheel and the wider axle—or "truck," as it's known—rejuvenated the sport. The new technology was perfect for Vert skating's wooden ramps and concrete pools, and Vert's beach-culture ethic came to define skateboarding to the rest of the world.

By 1977, 200 U.S. skateparks had been reduced to about 80 by the skyrocketing costs of liability insurance. The only skaters who survived were hardcore. Their rebel music was punk and heavy metal, they festooned themselves with snake tattoos, and adorned everything with skulls and crossbones. *Thrasher* was launched and became the preeminent skateboarding magazine, adopting the motto "Skate or Die!" But some 30 years after its inception, skateboarding was struggling to survive.

Meanwhile, a national resurgence in commercial real estate, driven by a debt-fueled economy, created hundreds of office towers with sweeping plazas, fountains, and ramps. This new landscape provided for a new kind of skateboarder. Urban kids, *street* kids, would define the sport on their terms.

Jovontae Turner, an Embarcadero regular and a widely recognized master of Street, has traveled the world as a professional skater. But he doesn't go to skateparks and hasn't even heard of the pools just across the bay in Oakland.

"Pools? What you mean pools?" asks Turner, 20. "I don't skate no pools anyways." A six-foot-tall black man with an earring, a nose ring, a lip ring, and a graduation ring around his neck—and some of the smoothest moves in skating—Turner is a celebrity here. Like most professionals, he endorses a skateboard that sells for about $45 retail, with $2 per board going to Turner. Last month alone, he says, 2,000 Jovontae Turner Skateboards were sold. But the graphic of last month's model has caused some controversy.

"My company, um, World Industries? They gave me, like, a choice between a nappy Negro in a watermelon and a white-devil graphic," he explains. "So I went with the nappy Negro. It was a joke, you know. If you was smart, it was a totally sarcastic thing. But people too serious, they don't get it."

If Turner is serious about anything, it's about not appearing too serious. He can lay out a wild 360° kick-flip

with extreme height but he'll do it with a minimum of effort. Ultra-smooth. "Tricks get harder," he says. "But instead of gettin' all technical, they're, like, all sryle now. I see hella skaters out here doin' stuff like it's no sweat. But pools? Man. Back in the day I tried to skate a pool. All those guys skating pools, they were always trying to dis me. Slash dogs and shit. They all, like, hatd and gnatly and shit. Pools, that's totally different than skateboarding. That's foul."

But after the fires, foul became fair. And a fair number of pools—18 in all—had been drained by skateboarders across the Bay to create the greatest collection of pools in skating's history. "Draining a pool's not tough," says Ruben Orken, 23, of nearby Berkeley. "You just get a hose goin' down the hill, suck on the end until it starts flowing, and you're there. It's just like siphoning gas. When most of the water is gone, we form a bucket brigade to get the rest. It's a little bit of work, I guess, but where else ate we gonna skate?"

Just as skiers name their runs, these skaters name their pools: The Egg, a deep ovular bowl; Peanut, with wide shallow and deep ends but a skinny neck in between; Bowling Pin, like Peanut but with a smaller shallow end; Roman, a straight rectangular pool with a wide column-like flourish; Football, an oval with pointy ends; Boot, shaped like Italy; Fig, a flowery-shaped trapezoid; Little Square, with rounded edges making it skateable; Mega-Phone, an extreme pool shaped like a telephone; Ttiangle; the self-explanatory Little Kidney, and the more recently drained New Kidney; Cups, shaped like a giant bra; Black Bottom, a black-bottomed pool darkened further by the fire; Country Club, at the site of a former country club; Capsule, in the form of a spacecraft; Cancer, a pool where the concrete floor is hideously pockmarked from the fire; and Big Nasty.

Big Nasty? "That one's not named for the shape," explains Orken. "It's just, like, because it's big and *nasty*."

Orken manages a team of professional skateboarders, taking them on promotional tours and keeping them supplied with T-shirts, skateboards, wheels, and whatever else they need. A white guy with a shaved head and smirking grin, he could pass as a stocky Sid Vicious if he weren't so friendly. He's sitting along the edge of The Egg right now, with 15 dusry Smirnoff bottles lined up along the edge of the shallow end. "We figure those were left by the owner when he came out to drown his sorrows," says Orken. "When we first dtove up hete thete were people just staring at the rubble, crying. 'My house, my fuckin' house.' This guy probably just kept sluggin' 'em away and throwin' 'em in the pool. We found all those bottles when we drained it."

"Fuck The Egg," says a sweaty Jake Phelps, who is trying repeatedly to do a nose grind along the edge of the pool. "With that death box and the aftet skater is dropping into the deep end, swishing a wide loop along the wall and then trying to "ollie" out of the pool. No one can quite make it, but with each close attempt, the assembled skaters issue a throaty shout of "Unnhh!"

"That's the difference between Street skating and pool skating," says Phelps. "In Street they go, 'Wee!' In pools we go, 'UNNHH!'" His point—derogatory, obnoxious, and accusatory like most



Jake Phelps, *Thrasher* editor: "The difference between Street skating and pool skating is, in Street they go, 'Wee!' In pools we go, 'UNNHH!'"

steps, shit, call it Gnarlsville!" This pool has two remarkable hazards: a harsher-than-usual transition from the curved bottom to the flat walls, and the "death boxes"—ladder steps and a filter box in the deep end that can trap a skateboard and leave the skater hung up to dry, perpendicular and frozen, 10 feet above a hard concrete floor.

Right now the challenge is to get up enough speed to flip out of the pool, ride along the lip, smash the Smirnoff bottles, and drop back in. Phelps offered up the challenge and now skater of his points—is that pool skaters are more extreme, more involved, more real. But Phelps only cuts on those he cares about, and more than anything, he cares about skaters.

"Yeah, you gotta have balls to skate pools," he says, pointing to the brown drops of his dried blood on Egg's floor. "I caught some glass in my hand and it just started pouring. Still got a piece in there, wanna see?" Rebuffed on his offer to gross someone out, he throws down his boatd, charges into the deep end, squatting to pick up speed, and catapults toward the edge of the pool.

Four years ago, Phelps started working in the shipping department of *Thrasher*. Now he's the editor, largely because of his extensive knowledge about all kinds of skating. "It's the first real job I've ever had," he says. "Maybe the only job I'll ever have. But I live to skate, so what can I do?" Phelps, 30, is typical of the magazine's editors who were reared on Vert, but now have to come to terms with Street. "Some of those Street kids, they dis us—I'm not saying everybody—but they call us 'slash dogs' or 'slashers' because we're skating pools," says Phelps. "But why should they classify us at all? Because we're all skaters. I'm down to skate anything, ramps, pools, Street, whatever. But it just seems that the majoriry of skating is all Street because kids don't have access to these pools."

Not that access is ever an issue for him. For seven years, Phelps has lived in one of the worst neighborhoods of West Oakland, next to the freeway and the shipping yards. His home is a former warehouse of the Phoenix Iron Works, whose logo is tattooed on his right shoulder. Inside, the awesome centerpiece is an 11-foot-tall, 20-foot-wide, and 45-foot-long wooden skating ramp. "Noah built an ark, Jake built a ramp," he says, insisting that it took exactly 40 days and 40 nights to assemble his masterpiece.

Phelps and his invited guests regularly skate the ramp with abandon, cranking metal on the stereo. "Judas Priest, 'Excitet'!" yells Phelps above the throbbing lead guitat, picking up his pit bull Buzz and sliding him down the ramp while the music tings in the rafters of the cavernous warehouse. "This is the fucking dopest music to end all skate music! You don't really skate unless you listen to this!"

Meanwhile, across the bay... there's no music in the Embarcadero. The biggest heavy metal consists of a giant, twisting fountain by Canadian artist Armand Vaillancourt. The same seven-year drought that fueled the fires in Oakland has kept this fountain dry from 1986 to early this summer. But the monolithic statue is alive nontheless, ringing with sound. Rhythmic noises, the music of the street, are everywhere: *slap, whack-zzzzzz, smack*. "The music of the Mecca," says Lance Dawes. "The Embarcadero—we call it EMB—it's ours now. It pisses off all these suits in the office buildings because it's loud and stinky—and we don't really give a shit."

In a neatly trimmed goatee, a backwards Giants baseball cap, and a hoop

earring, Dawes is passing out copies of the latest issue of skareboarding's freshest voice, a new magazine called *Slap*. Dawes, 22, dropped out of art school to start the magazine, which is financed by *Thrasher*'s owners, High Speed Productions. "I wouldn't say we're all Street, but yeah, that's 95 percent of what we cover," he says. "But that's 95 percent of what's goin' on. Pools are the hardest type of skating there is, no doubt. But so what. It's a generational thing. These kids out here, they don't have pools, they don't have cars. I mean, even if they did, what kook is gonna fuckin' spend days and weeks building a ramp when they could spend all that time skating?"

Before him lies the uneven expanse of Justin Herman Plaza, a brick garden meant to bring light and air to the giant skyscrapers that blot out that very light and air from the streets around them. Skaters from all over the world come to this plaza to skate the ramps and steps and dry fountain. Dozens of skaters gather here on the afternoons, and on a Saturday morning it's a safe bet you'll find more than 200 of them.

In fact, although hundreds of kids come from all over the county to skate at EMB, almost none has skated the pools right across the bay. "I came out here from Nashua, New Hampshire," says Rob Hott, a bald-headed, white 22-year-old built like a fireplug. "Three and a half days on a Greyhound—fuck, man! But I didn't do that ro skare no pools. You gotta understand, the people here at EMB are, like, famous to us. The freshest tricks happen right here, by the time they get out to New England, it's, like, old and shit. I wanna be here so I can be all fresh."

Sean Young, 19, is another skater who left home to make a pilgrimage to EMB from his hometown of Atlanta. He's a good skater, but he's better known for his skate-scars—scabs upon scabs on his shins and back—and his tales of woe, which have earned him the nickname Hard Luck. Without a place to stay, he slept under a ledge in the Embarcadero for months, allowing him to skate all day.

"But he didn't take no showers," says his friend Hott. "So he developed these scabs all over his body. Staph infections they called them. Some lady came by from a clinic and he went in for treatment. Then he came back out here and kept on skating. He didn't care, 'cause this is where you gotta be. Look, in basketball you watch the pros on TV. In skating you can come to EMB and hang with them. If you knew Michael Jordan, Charles Barkley, and Patrick Ewing were going to be playing in a playground in San Francisco, wouldn't you come out and sleep there?"

That kind of fanaticism has brought a revival to skateboarding. "For a lot of kids, you don't just dedicate to the sport, you dedicare your allowance to the sport," explains Jeff Klindt, 27, the president of Deluxe Productions, Inc. A lifelong skater, Klindt took over the skateboard company half a million dollars in debt five years ago and turned it around in less than a year. "We focused on Street because that's what's going on," says Klindt. "Last year we did $6.1 million in gross revenues and we see it growing. Yesterday I got a call from Prague saying, 'Send me 10 of zee new board.' They're down in the Eastern Bloc!"



Ron Allen, owner of Fun: "When skating was Vert it was suburban, it was punk rock, it was hardcore. Now that Street is big, it's hip hop, it's urban, it's slick."

In Klindt's mind, Street skating has an unmistakable philosophical underpinning. Urban Transcendentalism, he calls it. "It came to me when I was reading Emerson and Thoreau in high school," he explains. "Thoreau would say, 'Fuck, man, I'm hangin' out in my own natural environment, because it's a thing of beauty.' Most people, when they want to find natural beauty, they load up the station wagon and get in line at Yosemite. But skaters find beauty in their natural urban environment. You might step over a curb a thousand times and never notice it. But a skater might see the same curb and go, 'Fresh, that curb's perfect!' And then spend two hours creating with it, designing a perfect line in oneness with the curb, getting in rouch with his own spirituality. No doubt, if Thoreau and Emerson were alive now, they'd be skaters."

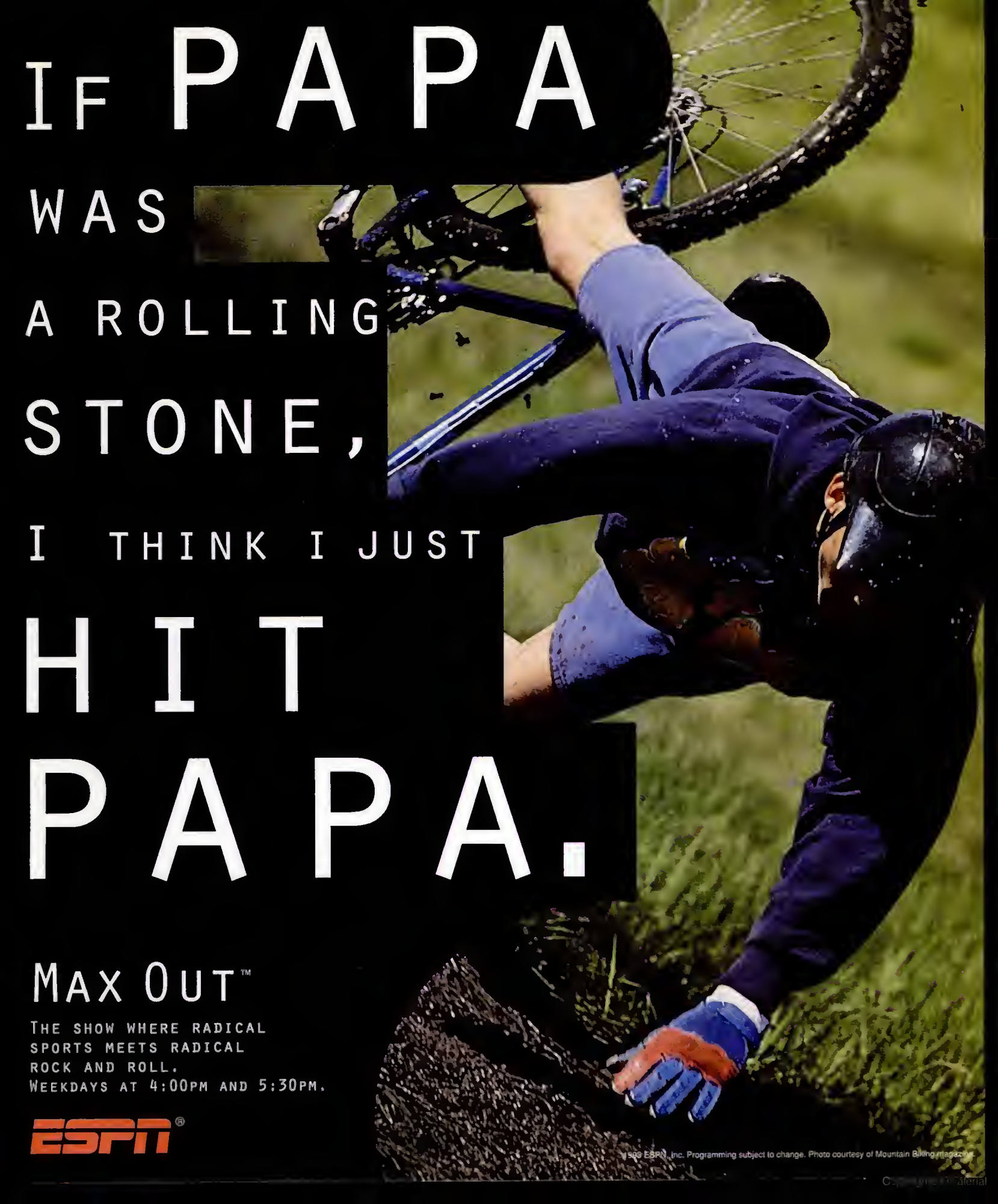
Ron Allen grew up with Klindt in Visalia, a city of 75,000, two and a half hours south of San Francisco. He's one of rhe only successful black skarers ro make it on the Vert scene. Now, at age 30 and in the twilight of his pro career, he's launched his own company, Fun. "There's so much talk in the black commuriry abour black-owned business I thought it was important that we have a black-owned skateboard company," says Allen. "So I started one. At first I thought I'd have only black skaters, and black boards and black clothes and black ownership. We'd be called Black Skateboards, a regular brand Nubian, ha! But I decided it should be a company for the good of skateboarding, not just *black* skateboarding."

A Vert veteran, Allen sees a whole new world in Street. "Back in the day when skating was Vert it was suburban, it was punk rock, it was hardcore, it was all these things that were really hard and tough, tough, tough," he says. "Now that Street is big, it's hip hop, it's urban, it's slick. I don't know if it's a color thing, but it's definitely an urban/suburban conflict. Black skaters tend to be into the hip hop culture, tend to be into the dress, you know, black skaters look good." In his baggy pants, hoodie, and stocking cap, Allen could be nothing but Street. But that doesn't mean he doesn't appreciate pools. "Now, most of *these* guys at EMB," he says, "they wouldn't appreciate pools, but me, if I could come back as anyone, it'd be Royce Nelsen."

Royce, now *Royce* can rip. He skates pools. Exclusively. He's known as a soul-skater, an old-timer oblivious to current trends, a quiet master of an obsolete art. "Skating was my life," says Nelsen reflectively. "But I'm 22 now, I'm into my girlfriend. I'm into studying industrial design at California College of Arts and Crafts and I'm studying my ass off. I've got a life, you know?" But as long as there are pools, Nelsen will skate them. When the fires came, he was one of the first to find the pools, and the first to master them. "Well, I don't know about *master*," he protests. "You'll always get better, you'll always try another trick. But you've got to devote yourself to it. Like all art it can always be perfected."

Nelsen pauses to survey Black Bottom. "What can I do? I skate pools," he says. "My friends are pool skaters. We've lived to see the skateparks disappear. We've seen pools come and go. This fire was terrible for a lot of people, but it was the greatest thing ever for us. Skaters create. We take what is given us and make something out of it. But for me, pools are probably all I'll ever skate. Maybe we're out of style, but we'll always find a pool to skate somewhere, you know? Who knows what we'll find after the next fire."

Cory Johnson's story about skateboard murderer Mark "Gator" Anthony will appear this fall in The Best American Sportswriting 1993 *(Houghton Mifflin).*



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KING OF BASS

With three gold albums on his own label, D.J. Magic Mike is the biggest hip hop star you've never heard of.

by Leonard Pitts Jr.

Two years ago, D.J. Magic Mike sat in an office at Sony Music as the men in suits tried to sweet-talk him into the big money. "They offered a seven-figure distribution deal for my next three albums," he says. "We said no. Because I'm totally against it. We have no problems putting our material out. We're already selling gold albums. What more can they do? Give me a platinum album? Yeah, I guess. But what about after then?"

He doesn't like the idea of selling out to a major label, he says, because the majors take control of a rapper's career—selecting which singles get released, even picking an image. He looks at Ice-T as an example of a rapper whose image was "straight chosen." Well past 30 and still droppin' gangsta rhymes? Magic ain't buying it.

Which begs the question, who the heck is Magic anyway, that he can turn down crazy money from Sony and sweat Ice all in one breath? Well, here: Take a listen to his stuff.

You are floating in liquid music, sliding down slowly, exquisitely, like a pearl in heavy oil. You drift in it, lost, abandoned. It pulses like a whale's heartbeat. The usual samples and the usual rappers dissing the usual pretenders swim slowly past. An occasional high-speed flurry of scratching ripples the surface. And still you bob in the groove.

"Bass!" The cry is sudden and needle-sharp, poking through your waking dream.

Bass?

Yep, bass. Because the bottom on this particular piece of music is milkshake thick and elephant fat. Deeper than Barry White in a coal mine. We're talkin' deep. We're talkin'...

Bass.

"Bass used to be predominantly a southern thing," says 27-year-old Mike Hampton, the man whose music you're listening to. "But it got to the point where now it's a big-time thing. You've got a lot of other groups that use a lot of bass also. But they don't bring it out front as much as I do. Bass is my thing, so that's what I expound on."

If you're not down with bass style, don't trip on it. It's a Florida thing, you wouldn't understand. Unless, that is, you're part of the hip hop underground that's become hypnotized by the sound that's sweeping the Sunshine State. D.J. Magic Mike is the acknowledged king of bass—the biggest hip hop star you never heard of.

Man's got seven albums to his credit, including two—*Bass: The Final Frontier* and *This Is How It Should Be Done*—released on the same day last March. Three of his previous albums are certified gold. And check this: Magic Mike, along with business partner Tom Reich, *owns* the companies that market and distribute his music.

Mike knows his quiet success comes as a shock to those folks who think Florida hip hop begins and ends with that nasty-as-he-wanna-be fella down the road in Miami. "Me being from Orlando, I try not to associate myself with Miami too much," he says. "It's two totally different styles. Luther Campbell has more of a party-oriented music. Mine is a slower street music. It's for cruising. Just put the tape in and ride."

On this particular Saturday, Mike's got his tape in and he's riding through the nearly deserted streets of downtown Orlando. You can hear him coming long before you actually see him; the music from his speakers is a subsonic pulse that booms like a tyrannosaurus on the move. Refrigerators a block away skitter across the floor.

Fifteen minutes later, he's sitting down to lunch at an Italian restaurant. Looking at Mike, you don't think "hip hop star." Actually, you think "football star" because of his thickly built, angular body. Then you think "business star." Watching him deftly twirl fettucine onto his fork while discussing seven-figure deals and international distribution, how could you think anything else?

The man would seem to have it all. And yet, you have to wonder, doesn't it ever frustrate him to be so large and, at the same time, so unknown?

"Every once in a while it bothers me," he admits. "But I'd rather have more sales than more hype. Queen Latifah is the biggest name known to man as far as women rap, and she's never had a gold album. And that's weird to me. I like her music. I listen to it. But we're talking about hype versus sales."

Fittingly enough for a man whose business is bass, D.J. Magic Mike likes to keep his eye on the bottom line. He learned that the hard way. Nine years ago, Mike was a teenage radio deejay in Orlando whose turntable and mixing skills predestined him for an entry into hip hop. He fooled around with a local group or two and then teamed with Miami rapper Clay D. and relocated 200 miles south. "It was disastrous," he says. "His people didn't recognize me as doing anything. I felt like I was getting used, so I just said the hell with it and came home."

Back in Orlando, he hooked up with Tom Reich through a friend of a friend. Reich, though not much of a hip hop fan, owned a label named Cheetah Records that wasn't doing much. The two became partners and released an album, *D.J. Magic Mike and the Royal Posse.* They were hoping for a little success that would help them build momentum. Instead, says Mike, "it just kept selling and selling. We went from there to *Bass Is The Name of the Game,* which was the first gold album."

And D.J. Magic Mike hasn't looked back since. Occasionally, he teams up with rappers—recently, the official billing was D.J. Magic Mike and M.C. Madness. But Magic grew disenchanted with Madness's mike skills and gave him his walking papers. In a comic strip that accompanies *The Final Frontier* CD, Magic's former partner gets killed off. Cold-blooded? Well, just remember that it's business. Always business

And make no mistake about it: It's *Mike*'s business. Not Sony's. Not Warner's. Mike is doing this thing his way. And if that means he remains a well-guarded secret, known only to a few hundred thousand hip hop afficionados, he has no apologies or regrets. He gets his gold, and that keeps him happy. It's all about staying in charge.

"You have to, man," he says. "You got to have some kind of control and know exactly what you're doing and what you want to do, where you want to go. The only person that can be in control of that is *me.* I know what I want to do and I know where I want to go. I know where I *don't* want to go, too. I know where I've been already."

Leonard Pitts Jr. is the pop music critic for The Miami Herald.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KEN ECHLES/ONYX





DAUGHTERS OF THE DANCE

With sex and skills as their weapons, the women of reggae are taking the respect nobody wants to give them.

by Elena Oumano

September 18, 1991. Even after midnight, it was still warm and balmy, a restless-making Indian-summer night, perfect for kicking hard on the reggae riddim. But the faux-palm-tree-and-bamboo interior of S.O.B.'s was unusually empty. Brooklyn, Queens, and Bronx massives were conspicuous no-shows at New York City's—if not the world's—first all-female reggae dancehall show. "No Ninjas, Shabbas, or Tigers!" Lorna Gee decreed from the stage. Scattered applause—not the reassuring sound of simulated gunfire—greeted singers and deejays as, one by one, they broke from a tense cluster by the ladies' bathroom and took up the mike.

Fresh off the Brixton sound circuit, Lorna Gee had barely settled into NYC when she noted the absence of women's names on dancehall flyers and decided to promote her own show. At Super Power Records in Flatbush, Lorna linked with veteran deejay Miss Linda, setting off a chain of beeper calls to Sensi, Lady English, Sister Dan, Charmaine, and Sabrina—New York City-based artists hailing from New York, England, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Trinidad.

The only man allowed onstage that night was the selector, who kept busy spinning discs and hanging up discarded jackets as the performers worked up a sweat. Charmaine and Sabrina's honey-dipped harmonies swelled over a fat Stalag beat as the deejays took turns ripping lyrics. Finally, Lorna Gee—reggae's female Afrika Bambaataa—stepped to the mike for her last number, looking trash in a gender-confounding African suit, dark shades, and leather cap, and brandishing an elaborately carved walking stick. By now, females in the audience were thoroughly wired, fueled by the confident display of goddess power. Only the dropped jaws on the poker-faced locksmen and don gorgons profiling near the club's back wall betrayed their astonishment at the out-a-order gal pickneys onstage.

Undaunted, Lorna Gee (for "great") whipped off her shades, eyeballed her audience, and vowed to liberate dancehall from patriarchal possession. "This is just Part One," she thundered, slamming down her rod of correction. "We're going to take it all over."

Fast forward to the New York Tamika Reggae Awards. The Palladium is packed stem to stern with reggae culture celebrating itself: Ites, green, and gold-flashing rastas, Kingston rude boyz, and big-bottom "mampies" flaunting size in tight, gleaming satin. Lorna Gee, along with Worl-A-Girl, the four-woman confederacy that was forged a year earlier at S.O.B.'s, are ttying to parlay their one song of stage time into Dancehall Invasion: Part Two. No such luck; despite loud protests from the crowd, the promoters bumrush the females off the stage.

Another year passes. Worl-a-Girl, by this time also known as the "Funky Divas of Brooklyn," are escorted onto that very same stage to accept 1992 Tamika Reggae Awards for Most Promising Artist and Outstanding Artist, Female.

Worl-A-Girl's years of persistence recently paid off when they signed with Columbia. After submitting a demo, they cinched the deal by rocking some Sony exec with a few a cappella harmonies. But perfect pitch, hit tunes, and trophies aren't enough in dancehall's battleground of egos. The girls still have to prove themselves night after night.

"At first they took us for a joke," says Miss Linda, a native Brooklynite and one of Worl-A-Girl's two deejays. "But a person would think twice about messing with four people. Now that they know we're as good as them, they sort of give us respect. But they still have their guards up."

Hip hop has its female monarch in Latifah, and any woman rapper with the skills and the nerve now stands a chance to get hers. But the reggae dancehall is a world apart, with its own frontiers, sovereigns, and ancestral memories. As the deejay spaces his chat on the bassline like the polyrhythms of a lead drum, ancient images linking men and drums telescope in thousands of heads. Trouble is, those old Africans never did like to pass the drum to a woman. It's the same with the mike today.

Until recently, the Jamaican music industry was a ramshackle boys' club controlled by "uptown top rankings"—a few big-belly men with big bucks who traded in artists like the corner shop sells patties. If Jamaican films *The Harder They Come* and *Rockers* drove home the warning that the artist who demands royalties risks his life, the failure of either of these movies to present even a single woman performer implies another, more insidious point: This community wants its females home, bound in apron strings. But somehow women have always made their presence felt.

"There were many, many artists in my mother's and grandmother's generation," says dub poet Sister Jean "Binta" Breeze. "They created the folk tales and the folk songs—all of that. The stage was their home; the only audience was their family. There was no television, just radio, church on Sunday, and stories by torchlight on a Friday night. You're in New York, you can go to S.O.B.'s and see dub poets or deejays. If you were in Patty Hill, Hanover, 20 years ago, you sat down with Aunt Tata. It's just a progression; it's still that oral tradition wherever you place it."

At first, those few Aunt Tatas who did get off the porch and onto stage center were invariably escorted by a man. Marcia Griffiths debuted 29 years ago as an 18-year-old soloist, but her career was built on a '60s partnership with Bob Andy and '70s backup vocals as one of Bob Marley's I-Threes. Until Griffiths began recording solo for Penthouse Records in the '90s, she says she never saw a royalty statement, much less a royalty. Likewise, deejay Sister Nancy made a name for herself around early-'80s sound dances, but more ofteo than not, top billing went to Nancy's brother, Twelve Tribes deejay Brigadier Jerry, or the era's king of slackness, Yellowman, who still drops lyrics like "Give me vagina/*Want* vagina...."

When dancehall computerized in the mid '80s and drifted away from roots-and-culture machismo toward boasts of punany (Jamaican for "pussy")domination and gun war, high-pitched voices like Sister Nancy's fell out of favor. Singers Marcia Griffiths, Nadine Sutherland, Pam and Audrey Hall, J.C. Lodge, and Cynthia Schloss eked out livings doing combination tunes with male deejays, serving as ultra-femme sweeteners to the men's rough, cocky stance.

By the late '80s, Shelly Thunder, Sister Charmaine, Lady G, Lady Junie, Sister Maggie, and Junie Ranks

PHOTOGRAPHS STEPHANIE PFERIENDER HAIR AND MAKEUP PATRICK SWAN, NYC

Choir girl turned deejay Patra, age 19: "I wanted this to happen since I was five. I was born a star."

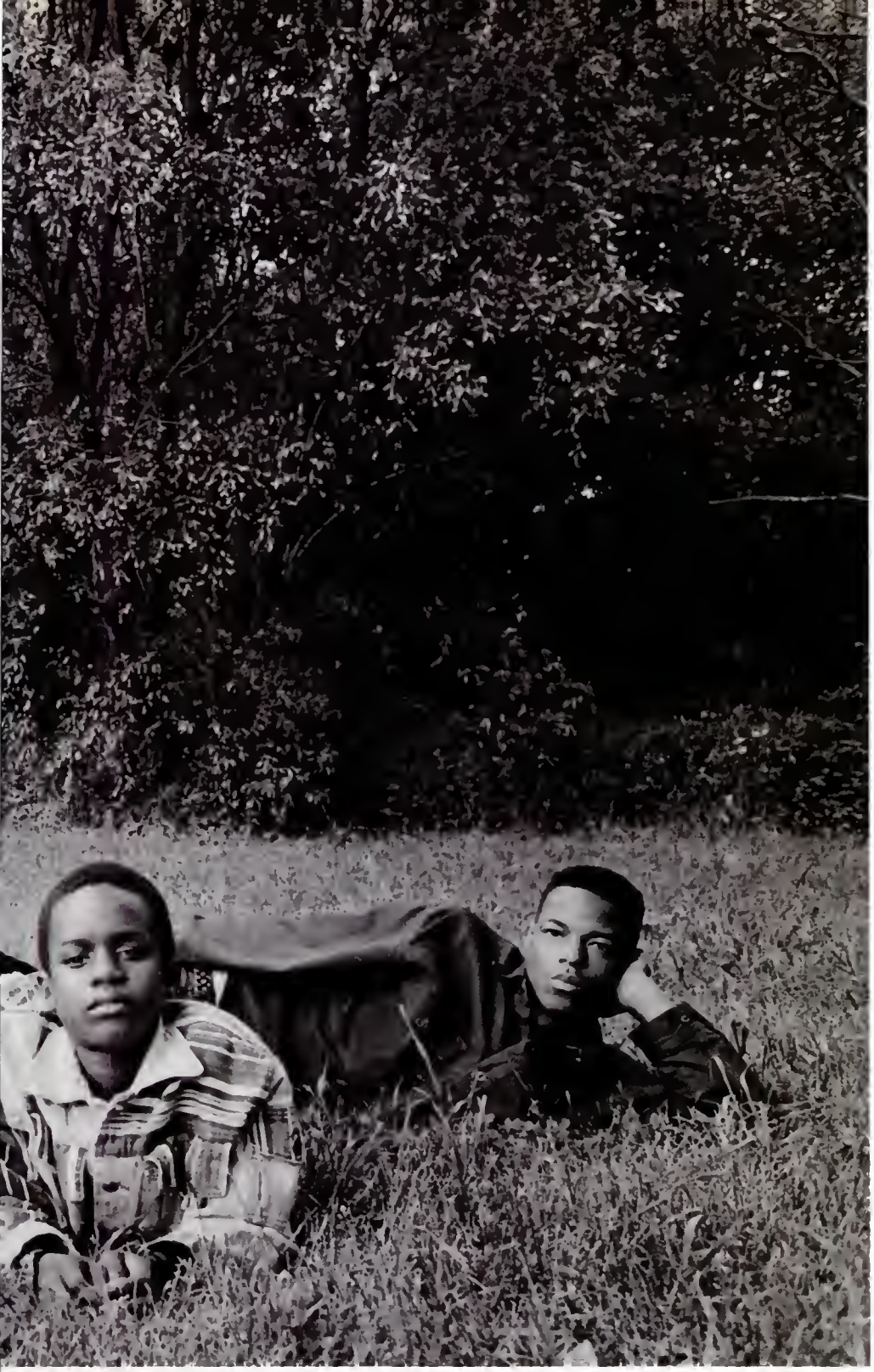


elbowed their way into the deejay fraternity, mostly through duets with men or by paying them indirect homage via answer tracks—"counteractions" to men's hit songs, recorded on the same riddim.

Shelly Thunder's "Kuff" was a precocious exception: Riding her own rhythm track, Thunder aimed a stinging retort at the tune "Nasty Girl" by Lecturer—whose lyrics advocate woman-beating—and pointed out that "sometimes a man fi get KUFF." Thunder went on to win the best revenge: crossover success with the R&B audience.

Worl-A-Girl's "Murder He Wrote" is more typical: piggybacking on Chaka Demus and Pliers' "Murder She Wrote" riddim, it backchats the original's misogyny. "If we don't defend ourselves, who will?" Miss Linda asks with passion. "All the men in reggae do is distress the women. If they're not talking about our body parts, they're talking about what they did to us."

But with American record labels feeding heavily from the reggae talent pool, a new power structure



Sister Carol and family: From Black Cinderella to Mother Culture

is imposing itself on the Jamaican scene. The flicker of money—that dependable bottom-line equalizer—is fast becoming the sole lure. Male or female, the majors don't care. But capturing the mike at a local sound clash is still a tough job for female dancehall artists, especially in Jamaica, where poverty, U.S. immigration laws, and dreams of the good life grease the competition with the sweat of desperation.

"I don't go to a dance unless I get the job to work," says Lady Shabba (who is no relation to Mr. Loverman). Despite her virile deejay persona, she'd rather practice at home than beg for the mike. "For me to reach in the dance is gonna be a fight," she says matter-of-factly. "If I tell them my name is Lady Shabba, even if I show them I.D., they're still going to fight me."

Shabba is going it alone, but historically Jamaican female artists have relied on the kindness of male managers. Countless promising careers have become mired in the quicksand mix of business and pleasure. "More often than not, the producer gets involved with her personally," says Columbia A&R exec Maxine Stowe, a 14-year veteran of the reggae business (see sidebar). "His vision of her changes, and he can't deal with the crowd going after her. Over and over, it's the same story. She may not want that, but she's only one of many."

Nowadays, a new breed of reggae female is emerging: the swaggering "cocky bully" brigade that eschews a self-righteous defense for a ruder-than-thou offense. Packs of these autoeroticists roam today's dancehalls, clad in tight "batty-rider" bicycle shorts and see-through negligees. Intoxicated by their own sexual power, they lurk in shadowy corners, springing to life when the spotlight flashes on their semi-naked wind-and-skin-out dance, their eyes blind to all but the pantomime of lust.

Deejays Lady Saw, Queen Paula, Princess P, Lady Mackerel, et al., relish the brutal hilarity of their sex-object status. The term "rude" doesn't approach the rawness of songs like "Everyday Cock" and "Mi Man Pon Mi." Exhilarated by a heady rush of unladylike freedom, cocky bullies vow graphic, X-rated promises to "knock the stone off the buddy [read 'willy'] head" and to dole out punishing "agony" as good, if not better, than they get.

But such "buddy terrorism" is an expedient to be dropped after one reaches a certain level of success. "It doesn't make sense you go out there and talk a bag of slackness," sniffs singer/deejay Patra, who signed with Epic Records last year. "Just because Shabba say he's a 'bedroom bully,' why should women say, 'Okay, we are bedroom bullies for all the men'? You have to come original so people say, 'Whoa, I heard this music from Lady Patra, and she was slamming, man.'"

Patra speaks from experience she'd just as soon forget. For a few fleeting moments in 1991, even this staggeringly talented 19-year-old stooped to conquer: "Satan know twenty more man dead/Becaw we broke off the stone off of the head./The buddy? Yes, we a own it.... Lawd, seh we control the man."

Only a few short years ago, the former Dorothy Smith was singing praises in the church choir by day while mashing up the competition at school deejay contests as Lady Patra. Today, the onetime country rag-gamuffin jets between her apartment in New Kingston and another in midtown Manhattan.

"Maybe I was the lucky one," she concedes, before playing for me every track of her as-yet-unreleased *Queen of the Pack* debut LP. It dazzles...even over the telephone line. Does she ever have to pinch herself? "Omigod, all the time," she laughs. "I say to myself, 'Is this really happening?' I waited so long, but it never happened before this time."

I remind her that she's only 19. "Yes, but I wanted this to happen since I was five," she sighs. "I was

SHE RUN TINGS

Reggae's female power players take care of bizness by Maureen Sheridan

With the wurldwide spread nf reggae music has come another, even more remarkable phenomenon: The female presence in the business is now so sttong that the reggae "fraternity," as it was once tellingly known, might be better described as a sorority. That any urban music business wuuld be dominated by women execs is a surprise, but for the rough-and-tumble reggae wotld to be overrun by sistren—some of them Jamaican musical royalty, some Japanese dancehall fanatics, some of them chubby white Jewish girls—is nnthing shnrt of amazing.

"Wumen have led reggae's resurrection," says Vivian Scott, vice-president nf A&R for Sony/Epic, who was in the vanguard herself when she signed Shabba Ranks in 1990, after bringing Third World to PolyGram during her years there. "Wumen are doing most of the signing now," she says, naming Lisa Cortes of Mercury, who signed Buju Banton, and Sony/Columbia's Pamela Turbov and Maxine Stuwe.

Stnwe's reggae roots run deep. The niece of fabled reggae producer Clement "Coxsone" Dodd, she got her start with his legendary Studio One record label, later moving on to artist management (Sugar Minott and Youth Promotions), and distribution (New York's VP Records). But when she put out the commercially successful LP *Dancehall Reggaespañol*, Columbia offered her a job. As A&R manager for reggae, Stnwe—with the help of Sony's Los Angeles-based A&R rep Pamela Turbov—has assembled a stellar lineup, including Super Cat, Tony Rebel, Mad Cobra, Tiger, and Wailing Souls. "Some days when I come to work, I have ro ask myself if all this is really happening," says Stowe, whose reputation as one of the most powerful women in reggae apparently hasn't gone to her head.

The first female to sign a reggae act to an international label was Island Records's Denise Mills, whnse A&R coups include Black Uhuru, a group she also managed, and Steel Pulse. Also with Island is Suzette Newman, a Brit who "fell in love with the culture" at age 16 and has since worked in numerous capacities with Sly and Robbie, Aswad, Gregury Isaacs, and Jimmy Cliff. Newman recently got Chaka Demus and Pliers signed to the label.

Although Mills remembers being gently chided by Bob Marley for wearing jeans (not Rasta-correct), and Stnwe jokes about the stories that she's "slept with everyone," such slights are easier to ignnre these days. Nnw even the hardest dancehall dons have little choice but to get along with their powerful sisters.

But change is slnwer at home. Sonia Pottinger, who became Jamaica's first female producer in 1968, describes her male peers as "unscrupulous from the highest to the lowest." And Jamaican dawtas like promoter/manager Babsey Grange and Louise Fraser-Bennett face similar obstacles today. Fraser-Bennett, who once distributed records on foot for Bub and Rita Marley, is now a manager, promoter, and publicist. She is also the main force behind the Sound System Association, governing body of Jamaica's powerful (both in wattage and influence) mnbile music sets. Fraser-Bennett is used to being told that what she does is "a man's job," and was once, she says, physically accosted backstage hy a leading deejay, who "had a personal dispute with Ninjaman [whom she manages] and wanted to shake me up to get back at him." Fraser-Bennett says that "95 percent of the men in the music industry don't like me. I put them in their place, and no Jamaican man likes being put in his place."

Common to all membersof the multicolored reggae sorority is commitment: to a cause, to a culture, to a music. As their influence grows, the music continues to thrive. Maxine Stowe predicts that the sisterly influence on reggae will only increase: "The decisions that need to be made fur the future need female energy."

Jah seh she approve.



born a star and I always wanted to be in the light. But I know when I'm 25, I can look back and say I worked hard." Part of Patra's hard work includes daily iron-pumping at Manhattan's Mid-City Gym and artist-development classes, insurance against faux pas on the order of Buju Banton's "Boom Bye Bye" debacle.

"I'm learning how to talk to people," she elaborates. "How to do my interview properly, how to sit around tables, what makeups you wear in the daytime, interview makeups, dinner makeups, how to hold a knife and fork. I'm not saying I don't know how, but better to learn the right way."

Regardless of Patra's aspirations, the dancehall intelligentsia still views batry riders and slackness—rather than good table manners—as necessary and welcome feminist advancement. "Jamaican women have to come out as strongly with their own sexuality as the men," says Sister Breeze. "Ghetto people have so little that they have to celebrate what they do have. If you don't have a house, you don't have a car, and everybody is flashing around with their nice house and big car, then it's a healthy mind that can throw on a batry rider and steal the show."

Carla Marshall is one such healthy mind. "I like breaking rules men set," she says. "I'm a dancehall goddess, to the top. I'll wear a batty rider and my printers [right shorts], but they're warrior clothes."

Like most dancehall dons, deejay Louie "Typewriter" Rankin is blissfully ignorant of such sociopolitical implications. "I love seeing the womens in the dancehall," he drawls with a sly grin. But at the suggestion of a lyrical clash with a female, Rankin laughs disparagingly. "It wouldn't be no competition," he boasts. "I'd just run over them. The women should do their own. If they come into my castle, they'd be on tou much of a higher stage. And there ain't a bigger gun they can fire. Heh, heh, heh."

Apparently, "Big Gun" Rankin's defeat at the wicked mouth of Carla Marshall has slipped his mind: She was performing at New York's Ritz last year when Louie suddenly grabbed her mike and asked if she'd ever been fucked by a 14-inch cock. "Bumbah!" Marshall exclaims at the memory. "I just said very nicely, 'You wouldn't know because you don't have that.' He wouldn't let me have the mike, so my sister got another mike. 'Watch it! Hold it! What is this?!' I said. 'Understand this Louie,' and I started chanting: 'Some big-wood don don't have no money/Yet they wan' drive out Benz punany/Most don like dat lack agony/Ten minutes what dem have for two lady.' The crowd went off, and all he could say was, 'Gal, you done, gal, you done, gal, you done!' I said, 'Louie, I want you to know the only way me done is if you dick more than two inch or your tongue bigger than you wood! Watch it!' Then he hugged me and said, 'Yuh wicked! Yuh wicked!' When he went offstage, his friends said, 'She mud you up bad!'"

Behind their amazon facades, most buddy terrurists are just nice girls with ambition. An nffstage recitation of their more carnal lyrics can turn cocky bullies coy. "Sometime you gotta talk it with parable," says Junie Ranks. "Yuu understand me? Some of them just go raw with it," she giggles. Under pressure, she finally offers an illustration: "Some would say the raw 'P,'" she says primly. "I prefer to say 'punany.'"

So would 21-year-old Princess Goldie, who blends ingenuous wise pickney charm with straight outta Nostrand Avenue je ne sais quoi. "I like clothes that are tight because I'm slim," says the mother of two.



Worl-A-Girl (Charmaine, Sensi, Miss Linda, Sabrina): The Funky Divas of Brooklyn

But she draws a fine line: "I don't wear batty rider."

Goldie came up hanging with the guys in the basement of a Brooklyn record store. "Me and my friend was the only woman down there," she says. "Everybody would hold the mike and put it on tape. Then we'd listen to it and laugh."

Even her nightmarish debut several years ago at Manhattan's Silver Shadow didn't stop her. "Well, they didn't really like me," Goldie admits with a rueful laugh. It was my first time on a big stage, and I was so shy I turned my back. I was wearing a dress, stockings, and shoes, and they didn't like that either. When you act shy, they boo you, so you have to act brave. I was so scared, and they were like, 'I don't think so.' But they liked when I sang 'Do You Know Where You're Going To?' in combination. The deejay was telling them to care for them life and stop shooting each other, and they cheered for us."

Goldie eventually traded in her nice-girl outfit for spandex and elaborate orange and purple hairdos. Today, she'll drop to the stage floor for a lightning series of one-arm push-ups, bawl out a sweetly hoarse "Lie Down and Do It," crack you up in her next number with a demand for "Punaney pension/Becaw this is a ting me haffe mention," then hail up Selassie I and close out with a heart-wrenching cover of "Downtown." But all her versatility has yet to pay off for Goldie, whose goals are perfectly clear. As one of her songs goes: "A so me stay, yes a so me stand/Me nah go back a yard until me make a million."

Just a few blocks and a world away, Sister Carol might be in her Brooklyn kitchen, stirring a pot of Ital stew for her husband and four children while scribbling the germ of a roots & culture lyric. Sister Carol East debuted almost 15 years ago at a college show as the Black Cinderella, performing a sonically faithful copy of Brigadier Jerry. "Once I got the mike and I start, it was pure noise," she recalls. "It felt good then, but after going home, I thought, 'Wow, did I really deserve that?' I was forced to start writing and creating my own material, my own style."

As increasing numbers of the world's youth go hungry, homeless, unloved, and astray, Carol has chosen to use her music strictly for uplift-ment, assuming her mature role of Mother Culture. "Tings and times are just getting bad," she says. "There's so much child abuse, so much children in rehab center. I'm sure 10 years ago the numbers weren't the same." The sense of responsibility in her voice is clear.

Since she took movie audiences by storm as the lyrical Wild Thing in Jonathan Demme's film *Something Wild*, Carol's steady career has eclipsed scores of meteoric one-hit wonders, winning her a permanent niche in the dancehall. Her husband is now her manager, her live performances feature her two youngest children bogling by Mommy's side, and her Black Cinderella label continues to turn out songs featuring that unmistakable alto with the focused force of an A train hurtling toward 125th Street.

But the major labels seem unimpressed, so Mother Culture observes their scramble for dancehall artists with a jaundiced eye. "I'm not against the people they sign," she says. "But I never could figure out how these record companies think. If not for the support of the people, you would have some doubts as to 'Should I continue?'

"Trust me, there's gonna be a change," she then says, as much to soothe her own frustration as to affirm her faith. "What I sometimes tell the sisters is, 'Try to respect yourself as a woman. Don't exalt yourself in a derogatory manner. Just present yourself in a respectable manner and, believe me, you'll get respect. Stand up on some positive ground. Plant a positive seed; hopefully, it will grow.'

"If you notice how things are going right now," she continues, "there's a lot of households across America, Jamaica, and the whole wide world with just a woman and children. The man is either in prison, dead, on drugs, or busy seeking another household to start and then leave. Everyone is looking for the next Bob Marley, the next Marcus Garvey, the next Malcolm X. But they don't know who to look for because they're not looking for a woman. A woman is going to be there, and that's not only by choice, but by destiny."

Elena Oumano, a frequent contributor to The Village Voice *and* L.A. Weekly, *is at work on her eighth book, an Elvis memoir with Joe Esposito to be published by Simon & Schuster.*



PUFF DADDY

This is not a Puff piece.

by Scott Poulson-Bryant

There are people in fashionable society who,
throughout their lives, carry with them the burden of their scandals,
as ineradicable from their personalities as a tattoo on their forearm.

—Dominick Dunne

PROLOGUE: Before Andre Harrell fired Puff Daddy, there was another story. Before he walked into Puffy's office on that nasty hot evening on July 8 and told his protégé that there was room for only *one* king at the castle called Uptown Entertainment; before Andre Harrell told Puffy that he would have to take his new record label, Bad Boy Entertainment, elsewhere; before Puffy packed up his office; before the telephone lines burned with theories (*Andre's threatened by Puffy's success, Andre was pressured from higher-ups at MCA, Andre's bosses never liked Puffy anyway, they never understood him, never tried to, Puffy's just a troublemaker*); before Andre was saying that Puffy "had particular ways he wanted to do things that weren't in the direction I wanted Uptown to go...." Before all that, before Andre decided that Puff Daddy was "unnecessarily rebellious," there was another story to be told about Puff Daddy. A story that started like this...

As hip hop makes its mad dash toward the finishing line of high capitalism, it will need a hero. And there he is, shirtless, the waistband of his Calvin Klein boxer briefs peeking perilously over the edge of his black shorts, the skull tattoo on his left breast gleaming red, mingling with the other guests at Uptown Entertainment president Andre Harrell's party in a posh suburb in northern New Jersey. It is summer 1992 and it's the weekend that Whitney married Bobby and the cream of black entertainment society has invaded this coast for the show. The FOAs (Friends of Andre) swim in the pool, jam to Kid Capri on the 1 and 2's, and play shirts-on-skins b-ball on the court out front, waiting for the catered food to arrive from the Shark Bar, Manhattan's West Side eatery of choice for black entertainment types. Russell Simmons is there, and Veronica Webb and Keenan Ivory Wayans and Babyface. But Puff Daddy is the only one with a briefcase, one of those shiny, bomb-protectant joints, opening it and closing it periodically to show folks the information inside: initial artwork for the logo of Bad Boy Entertainment. And his first words to me, as I make my way onto the back porch, are not hello or even hi how are you, but, instead, "Yo, nigga, why you frontin'?" Frontin', as in not calling him when I said I would.

We'd actually met a few weeks earlier at a fashion show, and after introduc-

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BUTCH BELAIR

tions and small talk, he'd said to me then, "You should write a piece about me." Not only, I thought, is he an A&R man, party promoter, stylist, video director, record producer, and remixer, but he's also his own publicist. It's that kind of boldness, that confident sense of purpose, that drives Sean "Puff Daddy" Combs along the path to success he has chosen. Indeed, he is a boy wonder, and, at 22 years old, possibly the second-youngest record-company president—just two months behind Dallas Austin—when Bad Boy launches this year. Codirecting and costarring in the videos of Mary J. Blige and Jodeci—the jewels in his young crown of achievement—he inspires the same kind of awe and jealousy usually reserved for a front-and-center star. There is so much to do, in fact, that he employs two live-in assistants to manage his growing schedule of meetings and growing roster of acts.

And Puffy cherishes his status, thrives on the exuberance of his youth and its possibilities. He likes the hanging-out nature of his work—the club-going and party-hopping, keeping on the very edge of what's young and black and hip. But Puffy brings something else to his behind-the-scenes machinations—he's his own best logo. The postcards announcing the debut of Bad Boy feature Puffy in all his cultivated B-boy glory, shirtless and seated underneath a lonely streetlamp in one, poised behind jail-like bars, his arms raised dramatically, in another. He has the aura of a performer; quite possibly he is the only A&R executive in the business with as many groupies as his artists. He's the shadowed love man in Mary J. Blige's "Reminisce" video and the placard-carrying strutter in Heavy D's "Don't Curse" clip. "Puffy," says Andre Harrell, "is the perfect icon. He embodies that kind of charisma and star power." In the fickle world of hip hop, Puffy creates heroes and makes a hero of himself in the process.

But heroes, because they are heroes, usually bear the cross of their constituents' sins; heroes often take falls. And just after Christmas 1991, as he attempted to present a gift to his community in the form of a fund-raising celebrity basketball game, Puff Daddy's ascendancy almost came to it's first abrupt and complete—some say inevitable—stop. What began as "an opportunity to get dressed up in your newest gear, a colorful event 'cause black folks always want something to go to to be colorful," as Andre Harrell put it, ended up as a tragedy that would reverberate around the globe. At the Nat Holman Gym at City College in Harlem, nine people were killed, victims of a stampede of bumrushing, overeager fans. Puffy was the promoter and organizer, and in the aftermath of the event, he found himself at the center of the serve-and-volley toss-up of laying blame and anointing responsibility. His name, once synonymous with all that was fierce, irreverent, and youthful about hip hop, was now the very definition of all that was fragile, violent, and immature.

Puffy was a ham," says his mother, before rolling off a litany of examples like a proud stage mother. He modeled with Stephanie Mills in a *Wiz* layout for *Essence*. He was a Baskin-Robbins ice-cream boy in another spread. But he'd always loved music. "I didn't know exactly what he would do, but he was blasting me out of the house with this mixing kit I bought him when he was 13, making that noise, scratching those records." The house was an apartment in Esplanade Gardens, a middle-class complex in Harlem. Then, when his mother's work for United Cerebral Palsy forced her to relocate to Westchester County, home became Mount Vernon, a mixed-race suburb just north of the Bronx. His father, who owned a limousine company, died when Puffy was three, and his grandmother raised him with his mother. "My mother was the man of the house," Puffy says now. "She was running shit."

But Sean—who became Puffy when he was about 12, in a game of the dozens—was looking to the future anyway, to Howard University, where he would find out what being the man was really about. "I knew they had mad girls down there, and parties, but I really wanted to get a black education." He found out in his first two weeks on campus that there was a world to conquer. "I was looking at things as a businessman by then," Puffy says, remembering his introduction to black college life. "Experiencing black people from all different lifestyles, different parts of the country. I had to learn from this."

He had to learn, basically, that it wasn't who you were but who you knew. He brought his Harlem flavor to bear by throwing parties that became the place to be Friday and Saturday nights on Howard's campus. "I started gaining friends from that. I could get anything I wanted on campus," he says. "If I needed to get my car fixed, I knew where to go. If I needed the English paper, I knew who to go to. If I needed an exam or some weed, I knew how to get it."

PUFFY HAS THE AURA OF A PERFORMER; QUITE POSSIBLY HE IS THE ONLY A&R EXECUTIVE IN THE BUSINESS WITH AS MANY GROUPIES AS HIS ARTISTS.

So: schoolwork could be bought; life was easy; Puffy had it made. But he admits now that his methods were suspect. "I had a lot of immature ways about me. I don't agree with all that stuff now. I had a lot of growing up to do."

Back in the late '80s, when Puffy was in high school and grooving into the wee hours to the beat of house music and hip hop, artists would come to clubs to film their videos. Puffy found himself dancing for Diana Ross, Fine Young Cannibals, and Babyface. Seventeen years old and hungry for a life in entertainment, he was still confused: Should he be a shaker, doing the Running Man for admiring audiences? Or should he be a mover, actually running things as The Man? When he saw the "Uptown Kickin' It" video and the young brother named Andre Harrell at the front of the boardroom table, he decided he "wanted to be the guy sitting at the head of the table, pushing contracts aside after signing them." Heavy D, a fellow Mount Vernonite and a premier artist at Uptown, hooked him up with an interview that landed him an internship working Thursdays and Fridays. Up at five a.m. each Thursday to get to New York by 10, Puffy would make it back to Howard by midnight each Friday for his parties. Even sneaking onto the Amtrak, hiding in the bathroom to avoid paying the conductors, he was happy. "I didn't give a fuck," he says. "I was at Uptown."

"My vision for the company," says Andre Harrell, "was to create a label that was cool, that had that Harlem kind of cool hustler cachet to it." Puffy impressed Andre, "in his shirt and tie, doing everything right, real polite and respectful." But what he noticed underneath the polite attire was something else: "Puffy was a hustler." So when Kurt Woodley, the A&R director at Uptown, left the company, Harrell wasn't surprised that Puffy took him to lunch and asked to have the job. He was 18 years old.

His first project was Father MC's debut album, which netted a gold single and respectable sales, carrying on the too-smooth style that became Uptown's specialty with Heavy D and Guy. But gathering dust were two other projects: Jodeci, a four-man singing group from North Carolina whose first record had passed without notice, and the future Queen of Hip Hop Soul, a Bronx girl named Mary J. Blige.

Utilizing stereos at high volumes should be limited to VPs and Directors," reads a memo on the walls of some offices at Uptown Records. Puffy takes this seriously. His office actually vibrates with the force of the beat. As I walk in, Puffy's on the phone and before he cuts the call short I hear him say, "Nah, G, you think I'm gonna give the merchandising away? I come up with the flavor for my artists." The flavor for Jodeci and Mary J. Blige, Puffy's two biggest acts during his tenure as A&R man, came to him as a dream—soulful R&B singers in hip hop gear, a kind of mix-and-match approach that, in retrospect, seems absurdly obvious. A new genre was born. Hip hop soul, as Harrell calls it. Sound meeting sensibility at a typically contradictory African American crossroads. "And now," says Puffy, "everybody's trying to look like the groups that I put out, with the images I created."

Detractors point out that the style Puffy "created" is actually just an extension of his own Harlem homeboy style—that Jodeci, for instance, are just four Puffys onstage, playing out his own narcissism. "I wouldn't say they're exactly like me, but it's a combination

STYLING BY STEFAN CAMPBELL. GROOMING BY TONY MARSHALL FOR WJK/NYC


Calvin Klein

of me and young black America," Puffy says. He stops, ponders for a second, and then continues. "But if I was a honey, I would probably be just like Mary J. Blige. A bitch. Not in the negative connotations of the word but like, 'That's a *bad* bitch.'"

It was in this spare, busy office that the groundwork of the Puffy business occurred. The wall unit holds a small collection of books skewed mostly toward music and black studies, various Uptown artists' 12-inch singles, and a large color television usually tuned to one video channel or another. A life-size cutout of Mary J. Blige stands at attention near the door, as if to greet visitors with the realization of Puffy's dreams. A cactus plant, prickly as Puffy often seems, rests on the windowsill. His beeper, on vibrate mode, scurries around his desk like an impatient child; Puffy answers pages constantly. That is, when he isn't working on the weekly column he writes for *Jack the Rapper*, an industry journal recounting radio activity of current records. Or when he isn't meeting with prospective artists, who wait in the anteroom and grin at each other in anticipation of playing their demos for the man who seems to represent the increasing visibility and force of urban black boys in contemporary music. ("I saw him in that Karl Kani ad," one of them said earlier, outside the office. "Who that nigga think he is?" "Puffy," responded another, "that's who.")

He is remarkably soft-spoken, communicating mostly through body language: He might break into a sliding dance move when describing his night out at Mecca or some other club-of-the-moment. Or stand stock-still with a hard-headed stare, daring you to convince him. When a young designer comes in to show a video of his clothing collection, Puffy leaves the room after a glimpse at the screen, refers the video to Sybil, his assistant, then returns to the room and describes, to a T, what he saw only two seconds of.

One day in the summer of '92, Jodeci needed clothes for a *Regis and Kathie Lee* appearance. Puffy cabbed from store to store in downtown Manhattan, collecting baggy jeans and woolly skull caps, eating Chinese takeout, chatting into his cellular phone all the while. Late in the day, as I reached for my beeper, he said, "Damn, I never met a nigga get more beeps than *I* do." Pause: "I bet you one of those suburban kids, got good grades in school, went to college. You wanna win a Pulitzer prize, don't you?" This is Puffy: arrogant, boyish competition mixed with the seductive, coy recognition of ambition in others. I ask him later if he is conscious of the seduction. If, in fact, it gets him what he wants. "Anything I've wanted, I can say I've gotten it," he says, straightforwardly. "I just saw it and did it, you know? I observe. I always look at the situation before I speak and before I decide what I want. I don't just jump my ass buck naked into the firepit. I look at that motherfucker and see if there's any space."

After a long day of listening to demos, scheduling studio time, and preparing for the imminent debut of his own company, Puffy is headed home to the tony suburb north of Manhattan, in his white BMW, for a much-needed rest. In a contemplative mood, he takes a circuitous route through Harlem, crisscrossing the city streets as if on a memory mission, passing prostitutes on some side streets and lost-looking children on others. Here on the road, caughr for a moment between the rarefied world of Uptown (the record company) and the rapidly deterioraring wnrld of Uptown (his teenage stomping grounds), he talks about his dark side.

"A lot of my music is about pain. That's why the masses relate to it. It's attainable, people understand it. When Mary J. Blige sings about looking for a real love, it's fucked up, searching, you know? It's realistic shit."

As he drives up to a stoplight, he says, quietly, "I don't normally be smiling, real happy, youknowhumsayin'? Ain't nothing to be happy about. Things are fucked up. You got little kids starving, getting beat up, parents on crack, ain't got nobody to talk to.

"The only time I'm really happy is when I'm at a club or the rink and they play one of my records. The motherfuckers be screaming to it. They play one of my remixes and I see the look on their faces. Or I go to the concert and see all the kids dressing and looking like my artists.

"I could have got off on the highway, but I just have to drive through Harlem to remind me about all the fucked-up shit. How fortunate I am."

There's a story about Puffy that both his detractors and admirers like to tell. When he was a little boy in Mount Vernon, he wanted a pool, refused to swim in the public pool in the park. According to one version, Puffy begged and begged for the pool and was only happy when his mother took on a second job to pay for it. When Puffy tells the story, he describes the white kids across the street and how they teased him. "They would never invite me over. I used to cry. My Moms made sure she got me a pool that was two times bigger than theirs. It took her like a year to save for it and it was the only Christmas gift, nothing else, no socks, nothing." I ask if he thought he was spoiled. "My mother tried to get me everything I wanted. She always sacrificed and didn't do for herself. Maybe by some other standards I was spoiled, but I don't think so. I never did no flipping-out brat shit on my mother."

When we get to his house, he tells me he bought it because of the pool. It's a beautiful split-level, small by the town's standards, but comfortable. Puffy shares it with his assistants Mark and Lonnie, who each have their own room off the main hall. Puffy's bedroom is dominated by the closets and roomy, boxy shelf space filled with sneakers and shoes. Downstairs, a pool table takes up most of the space in the rec room, off of which there's a bar and weight room and mixing room for late-night scratching sessions.

Mark and Lonnie come in, carrying records and Puffy's suit, fresh from Agnès B. Shirts need to be ironed, so Puffy challenges Mark to a game of pool. The loser will iron. "I'ma make you my bitch tonight," Puffy tells Mark as they square up.

As Puffy wins game after game, the front door opens and his mother comes in, carrying painrings for the house. Everyone calls Mrs. Combs—a short, stylish woman with close-cropped hair—Mom. She eventually takes a seat at the bar and watches the game, telling me about her son's hustling nature. She tells me about Puffy's father, about how he was quite the player, the pool shark, how he would shoot pool and dice up around Lenox Avenue and 126th Street, and how Puffy probably gets his spirit, his competitiveness, naturally. Then her Mom-speak breaks in: *You should eat if you gonna go out. What are you wearing tonight? You want me to fix y'all some sandwiches?* And she does, heaping mounds of Steak-Umms with tomatoes and cheese.

Mark irons, Puffy dresses, Lonnie scratches on the turntables. Boys at home, before they become men in the street.

I HAVE TO LIVE WITH THE FACT THAT NO MATTER HOW MANY PLATINUM RECORDS I HAVE, PEOPLE THINK, 'OH, THAT'S THE GUY WHO MURDERED NINE PEOPLE AT CITY COLLEGE.'

You can take Hollywood for granted like I did, or you can dismiss it with the contempt we reserve for what we don't understand. It can be understood too, but only dimly and in flashes. Not half a dozen men have ever been able to keep the whole equation of pictures in their heads.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Last Tycoon*

Hip hop has always been—and will always be—about fabulousness and myth. It's about building new stages to perform newer songs while wearing the newest clothes. Bur from its fitful birth on the cracked pavement that lined the blocks of upper New York Ciry up until the mid '80s, when Run-D.M.C. rushed up the pop charts with the other American Realness acts (Springsteen, John Cougar Mellencamp), "hip hop" was "rap," ethnic and subcultural, taken for granted by the kids from around-the-way, dismissed by the High Pop tastemakers with the contempt they reserved for that which they didn't understand. But there were a few who could keep the equation in their heads. Russell Simmons and Fab 5 Freddy,

SOME KINDA VIBE

MINT CONDITION

From The Mint Factory [31454-9005-2/4]

ALEXANDER O'NEAL

Love Makes No Sense [31454-9501-2/4]

LISA KEITH

Walkin' In The Sun [31454-9004-2/4]

II CLOSE

More To A Man [31454-9500-2/4]

BOBBY ROSS AVILA

My Destiny [31454-9003-2/4]

VERTICAL HOLD

A Matter Of Time [31454-0010-2/4]

LO-KEY?

Where Dey At? [28968-1003-2/4]

SOME KINDA MUSIC

RODNEY MANNSFIELD

Love In A Serious Way [31454-0009-2/4]

Congratulations to **Vibe**
on some kinda first issue
from the A&M, Perspective
& Tabu families

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for instance, saw the "in," saw the never-quenchable thirst of major labels and downtown art galleries as creating the next, and logical, pit stops for this new, evolving thing. Some called it selling out.

But there was another generation behind them, who could also keep the equation in their heads, as they danced to the residue of black power that seeped through the grooves of Public Enemy and KRS-One records. They were also watching the decade-defining shenanigans on *Dynasty* and buying into the record-breaking event called *Thriller* and imbibing the language of bigness, or largeness, as it would be called in hip hop parlance, where wnrds come and go at a feverishly junk-bondish turnover rate.

Puffy is from that generation. They know that blackness means fierceness in the face of adversity. They knnw that you can yell "Fuck white people" or call yourself a "nigga" and make millions. Their first hip hop shows were often stadium-size or live freestyling on, of all places, MTV. They are conscious of their era, and they know they exist because they spend money on entertainment that tells them they exist. And closer to home, they saw that the people with the fresh cars and nice clothes were not parents of kids their age, but actually *kids* their age, kids with lethally legal and illegal businesses. Gettin' paid. Livin' large. Whether on the money-makin', boogie-down tip of the entertainment world or the hardcore of the street, black people could *own*. And what better to own and market, to turn into a mock grass-roots cottage industry, than the culture itself? Says one industry insider, "All these young boys wanna be in the music business to get large, when they would be out in the street selling drugs. The music industry is perfect for them, 'cause it's just a legal form of drug dealing."

Listen to Puffy talk about drive, about the reason he gets up in the morning: "The young kids—all the real motherfuckers across the world that's young and black—they need that real shit. Motherfuckers *need* that shit, youknowhumsayin'? They *got* to hear it. Like, if records stopped being made, motherfuckers would be jumping out of windows or something. That shit is almost like a drug."

That's also the reason he started throwing parties.

Hip hop parties had, for the most part, been banned in New York, due to an increasing amount of violence and recurrent, racist complaints about noise. But Puffy needed a nightlife. Why not just create one? "I found myself being this senior executive of A&R," he says now, "and I was like, yo, I wanted to use my power and my money and rent some of these clubs, so we could have a place to go." Kicking off his reputation with a Christmas party in 1989, when he was starting out at Uptown, he threw a fete for the industry, he says, "to kind of announce myself. It was real dope."

He teamed up with Jessica Rosenblum, a downtown club fixture, who once womaned the door at Nell's. She'd established a niche for herself by organizing social functions for the music industry and came with a reputation as a white woman on the hip hop make,

PUFFY IS SOMEWHERE BETWEEN GHETTO AND COLORED, SAYS ANDRE HARRELL. AND COLORED FOLKS WANT TO BE DOWN WITH THE GHETTO.

one of the many white faces popping up more and more frequently on the scene. She and Puffy became partners with the opening of Daddy's House at the Red Zone, a home for hardcore hip hop where you could roll with the flavor to the latest beats, complete with live shows and plenty of attitude. "We were equal partners," Puffy says, "but I was more on the creative end, I knew more of the people." Daddy's House received the imprimatur of the hip hop tastemakers and Puff Daddy became synonymous with the hippest underground jams in New York City. Rosenblum describes Daddy's House this way: "You know a party is a success when it turns up in a rap song. Daddy's House did."

But its success was short-lived. Fights began to break out. Jessica wanted to expand her own operation. Puffy had a regular job, with increasing responsibility. "It just started to become too much pressure for me," he says now. "And I was making money from work. I didn't want party promotions to be the main thing in my life."

But in December of 1991, one particular party would become the *only* thing in his life.

It all started when Magic Johnson announced he was HIV-positive. Puffy was upset and wanted to host a celebrity basketball game to raise both money and community awareness. Well-practiced by now in the art of promotion, on the day of the game Puffy had everything running smoothly. Heavy D had gotten involved in the plans, and by late afternoon a posse nf usually reticent artists—Boyz II Men, Mary J. Blige, Jodeci, Michael Bivins, EPMD—and hundreds of fans had shown up at the Nat Holman Gym.

"As it started getting dark, we had to shut the doors 'cause the line had got disorganized out front," Puffy says. "The police came in through the back door and we were like, 'Yo, there's too many people out there.' We told them we really needed their help. This white sergeant said okay and they all left the building out through the back and then like about an hour later, the people in the pay line started pushing on the doors. Inside the gym, it was only 40 percent capacity filled. But we weren't gonna let nobody else in. Anybody who got caught outside with tickets, we were gonna refund their money. We just didn't wanna take chances by opening the doors back up.

"But people started pushing from the outside and the doors just snapped off the hinges and people just started pouring in. People started jumping down the staircase. People started piling on top of each other and glass started breaking in the doors and people were getting scared and running.

"Pushing and pushing. It was more pressure. Then all of a sudden, I'm on the other side of the door, pulling people through so we could open some of the other doors, but even as we started pulling people in, more people were pushing through. We started screaming to people to get back, to back up. And like a few minutes later, we saw people passing out 'cause of the heat."

He pauses, drawing in a breath. "And we started seeing some scary shit. People's eyes were going back in their heads and I'm thinking, penple could die out here. A big kid had gotten stuck in the door and we couldn't pull him through or anybody else. The cops were being called, but nnbody was coming.

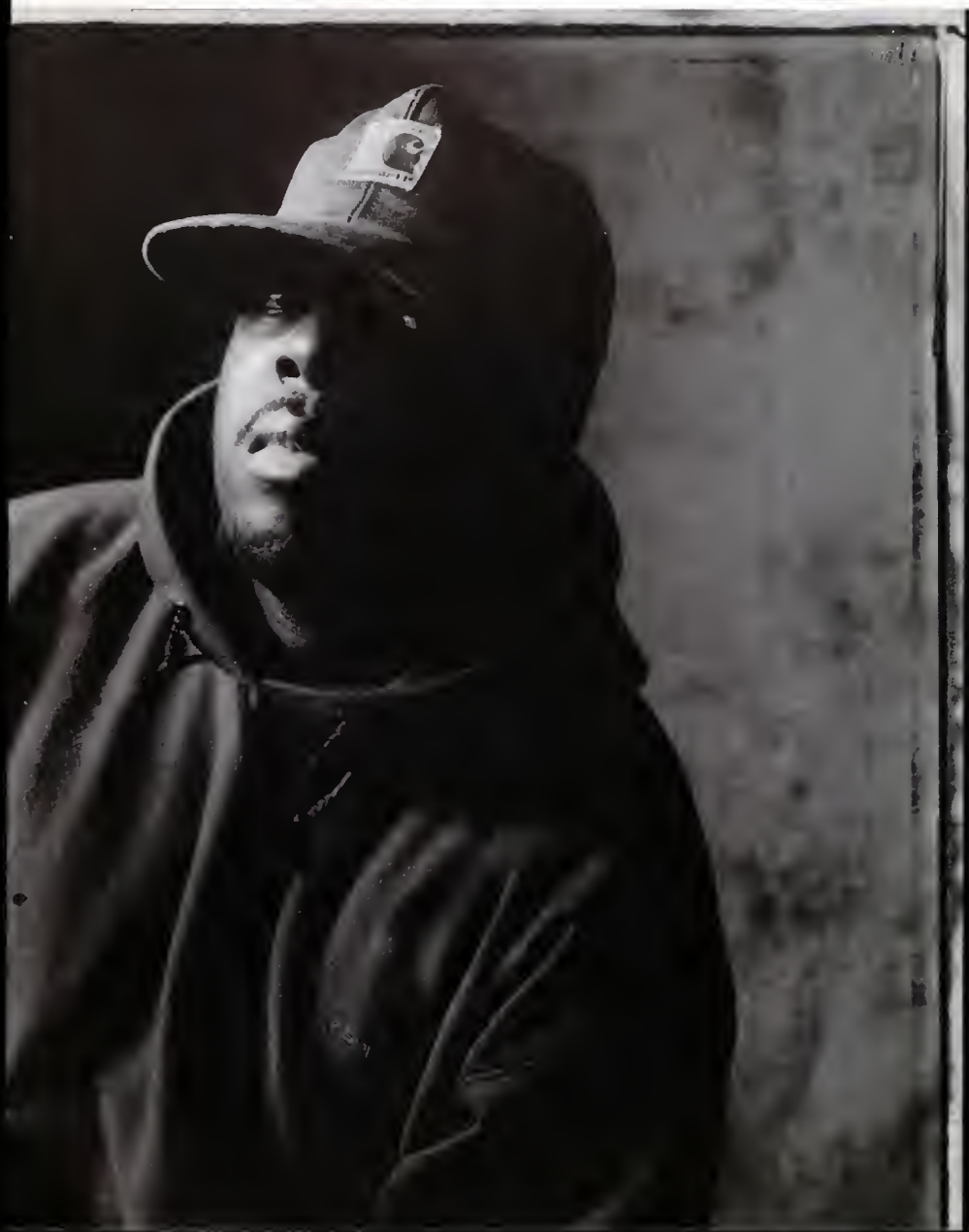
"And I could just feel it. I was thinking some of the people were dying or dead. People had started to regurgitate. Nobody was trying to give mouth to mouth resuscitation, so I started and other people started. One guy that I knew, we were trying to revive him for like 45 minutes. He was throwing up in my mouth but I didn't care. We were like, Yo, man, you gotta live. We were pumping his chest and breathing into him. And I'm seeing my girlfriend buggin' out because her best friend is there, not breathing, and I'm trying to give her mouth to mouth. And I start to feel this feeling, in the breath I'm getting back, that people were dead. I could feel the death going into me.

"Later," he continues, his voice quieter now, "I went home, and I kept saying to myself that it was all a bad dream, that I was gonna wake up. But I never woke up. And the next day we contacted the police and the mayor's office. But people just looked at the flyer and saw my name and Heavy D's name and started blaming everybody, people saying whoever threw the event must have fucked up. And the press started drawing conclusions before the actual investigation."

Accusations flew from all corners. The director of the student center at City College blamed the president of the Evening Student Government, claiming in *The New York Times* that she had misled him about "her skill in organizing such events, the size of the expected crowd and to whom the proceeds were to be donated." It turned out, also, that the AIDS Education Outreach Program, the charity to which a portion of the proceeds were to have gone, was questionable. It had not been registered as a charity in Albany, according to the *Times*, and "was not known among anti-AIDS groups."

In televised press conferences, Puffy looked shrunken and young, hesitant in speech and demeanor. He went underground to avoid the ensuing melee of judgment. Even Rosenblum, whom Puffy had hired to work the door (not

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the first single from his debut album, "NO PRESSURE."

executive producer: erick sermon for grand royal productions. all songs written and produced by erick sermon. management: bandit management

Def Jam recordings

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to co-promote, as was rumored), admits that the situation took its toll on him. "It made him learn to think things through," says Rosenblum now. "Puffy's used to telling people what he wants and having them execute it. Unfortunately, this time, the people working for him didn't fully execute the plan. It wasn't Puffy's *fault*, but it was his responsibility."

Says Puffy, "I started to lose it. I felt like I didn't want to even live no more. I was so fucking sad. The legal counsel was not to go anywhere, not to talk to anybody. But I wanted to go to the wakes and the funerals and try to provide some comfort, even though I knew my presence probably wouldn't have given comfort. But what I was going through, with the blame and stuff, was nothing compared to what the families were going through.

"I couldn't eat," he recalls now, sitting forward in his seat. "I was just sleeping, like a mummy. I didn't talk to nobody. And every time I turned on the news there was something about the event or the money or something.

"I was scared throughout the whole event. There's no big hero story to all this. I'd never had that much up against me. I had to be a man or die. And I was deserted. There was, like, fake, nosy support. But a lot of people I thought were my friends just fell by the wayside. I had my mother and my girl and Andre, and a few other friends.

"But I have to live with the fact that people meet me or see me and no matter how many platinum records I have or whatever, they'll think, 'Oh, that's the guy who murdered nine people at City College.' 'Cause they didn't check out the mayor's report that cleared me of all the blame. [The City Hall report actually found that Combs had delegated responsibilities to inexperienced associates and should have arranged better security to handle the expected large crowds.] But I imagine the pain the families go through and I understand that what I went through and will go through is nowhere near their pain. And that's the thing that kept me going, knowing if they had the strength to go on, I had the strength to go on and handle people looking at me and thinking whatever they're gonna think."

"The City College event grew him up quick," Heavy D says. "He was on a path where he could have destroyed himself. He was on a high, you know, he was 'Puffy!' doing all this stuff at his age. But every disaster has a delight. There's a lesson in disguise."

Always a "panicky young man," as Heavy D describes him, Puffy no longer moved with the same reckless abandon, rushing headlong toward whatever goal he set. And even though outsiders looked to place blame on easy official targets like City College or the police, Puffy found the answer in the community that bred his style, his music, himself. "It wasn't that tickets were oversold like people said. It wasn't the fire department's fault or the cops'. And it wasn't simply that 'niggas are crazy,' as people say," he says. "It's just that overall in the black community there's a lack of self-love. The majority of the kids weren't necessarily gonna put themselves in the position to get hurt, but when it came time to love their neighbors and move back, they couldn't love their neighbors because they didn't love themselves."

And that's probably the hardest thing for Puffy to accept: that, in essence, The City itself was responsible for the nine deaths forever linked to his name—The City and its dark side, which feeds on the constant restlessness of the shut-out and put-down, which takes away the places of recreation that might be a respite from the infrequent, hyped "events" kids are attracted to, the places where their heroes can shine bright and strong.

But Puffy's job was to create those heroes, and he had to go back to work soon after the tragedy. Jodeci and Mary J. Blige were blowing up around the country and bringing a whole new image of young blackness to the masses. Mary J. Blige's blasé, Uptown Girl attitude mixed with hip hop beats, and a talent-show vocal aggressiveness redefined the concept of the soul-shouting diva. Puffy was also at work on *Blue Funk*, Heavy D's darkest album, full of the pain of love lost and maturity gained. Jodeci became the standard-bearer of urban black-boy stoicism, but with a supple, gospel sound that made R&B edgy again.

And edginess is what Puffy likes. In the works was Bad Boy Entertainment, Puffy's own management and record company. During the aftermath of City College, says his mother, "A lot of people showed Sean their asses to kiss. I was there for him, and we became a lot closer, we started communicating better." She realized just how determined her son was about having his own company. "I didn't want him going down the drain," Mrs. Combs says now. "I told him not to worry, that we'd have our own thing. I had planned to help him all along, but this seemed like a good time. I invested in something for him."

"Puffy is a warrior, he'll go for his," says Andre Harrell. Sean wants Bad Boy to embody his own personal energy and philosophies. Bad Boy wants to be edgier, harder. They would sign a gangster rapper. I think Puffy wants to deal with more rebellious issues."

I ask Andre about Puffy's rebellion thing. He laughs and outlines his Theory of Black Folks: There are "ghetto negroes, then colored negroes who are upper lower class or lower middle class who want to go to college and feel the need to be dressed up everywhere they go, you know, working with the system so the system will work for them. Then there's just Negroes, sayin', I've had a credit card for ten years, my father went to college. Puffy is somewhere between ghetto and colored. He is very much like Russell [Simmons]. Puffy was raised colored, went to private school. And that's why he wants to be rebellious. He didn't grow up where rebellious was just normal. Colored folks want to be down with the ghetto."

Late one Sunday night, Puffy and I sit in his white BMW, on East 21st Street in Manhattan, and I ask him about the ghetto thing and its influence on his music. He tells me that even though he didn't grow up in the projects, he was "always attracted to motherfuckers who were real, niggas who really didn't have a lot. Like, a person could live in the suburbs, but they may not have no friends there. You don't really have nothing if you don't have no friends and your mother is a single parent and she may never be around and you ain't really got shit."

"Are you talking about yourself?"

"Yeah, in a sense. But the majority of kids in the suburbs was *made*, you know? Their parents made them a certain way. These kids from the ghetto had no choice. They didn't have shit, but they were *real*."

Finally he boils it down to its essence: "I don't like no goody-two-shoe shit. I like the sense of being in trouble. It's almost like a girl, you-knowhumsayin'? Girls don't like no good niggas. Girls like bad boys."

Heavy D believes that Puffy—the persistent kid from around the way, who found that all his dreams and nightmares could merge in a single moment—is "slowly yet surely realizing that what he has is a gift. In my opinion, Puffy was responsible for Father MC, Mary J. Blige, and Jodeci. Especially Jodeci. You gotta remember that they had a record out before, and they only blew up when Puffy got in the loop. But Puffy has to realize that that gift ain't for him. It's for other people."

With the debut of the Bad Boy artists, Puffy's ultimate test awaits him. The four acts on the roster are acts handpicked by Puff Daddy himself, not acts passed down for his overseeing. Although the first release, Notorious Big's "Party and Bullshit," featured on the *Who's the Man?* soundtrack, has an irresistible street flavor that seems to have caught the attention of the party people, it remains to be seen whether Puffy has the ears to go with his eyes, whether he can see a project from its inception to its fruition with the same level of success. Faith, it seems, will show him the way.

Sitting in the car on 21st Street, Puffy is preparing to go into Soundtrack studios to remix Mary J. Blige's next single. Perhaps that, and recounting the City College nightmare, explains the sudden darkness in his manner. He leans back in the leather seat and sighs. "I just like talking to God, realizing that my shit ain't nothing, my problems are so minute. I pray every night, every day, I talk to God a lot. I carry a Bible with me all the time."

He pulls a tiny, tattered, dog-eared Bible from his back pocket and turns to Psalms. He reads: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When the wicked, even my enemies and my foes, came upon me to eat at my flesh, they stumbled and fell."

This is the text of Puffy's next tattoo.

EPILOGUE: Whatever the reason for Puffy's dismissal from Uptown—and we may never know the real reason, or, for that matter, the true nature of the relationship between Puff Daddy and Andre Harrell—both men continue to speak well of each other. Harrell's Uptown will continue to oversee the development of Bad Boy's first three artists—at Puffy's request. Puffy will retain the Bad Boy concept and has the freedom to develop his dream elsewhere.

Just three days after being fired, Puffy remained his cool and contained self. "My only regret," he says, quietly, patiently, "is that if I had any flaws, I could have have been nurtured or corrected, instead of people giving up on me. Somebody older may think I have nothing to be angry about 'cause I did what they did in half the time. But I'm not ungrateful for what I've received." He sighs. "But this is just another chapter. This ain't no sad ending."

And he is right. It won't be long before there is yet another Puffy story to tell.

GIL SCOTT-HERON



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What does SWV have that Jade doesn't?

NINE INCH NAILS

by Christian Wright

SWV, carrying dufflebags and bad moods, have just returned to New York from a promotional tour in Florida. At the headquarters of RCA, their label, there's a commotion in the lobby—video monitors buzzing, press badges flapping, croissants growing stale on a table to the right—and the girls go all but unnoticed.

They stand around: Cheryl Gamble, 21, in a leather jacket and curling, six-inch orange nails; Leanne Lyons, 19, in white leggings and a denim jacket with her likeness painted on the back; and Tamara Johnson, 20, in a baseball cap and shirt open so the bra shows. They speak in hushed voices. Finally someone calls down to the desk to approve their passage upstairs. Meantime, they've found out the cause of the stir: the ceremonial unveiling of the company's new Elvis Presley statue. As the girls move through the alarm-rigged turnstyles, past security guards, toward a vast bank of elevators, Leanne blurts, "Elvis? Fuck Elvis."

Fuck Elvis, indeed. At the moment, the trio's got two R&B singles in the pop Top 10. "That hasn't been done since Elvis," says Kenny Ortiz, vice-president of black music A&R at RCA. (Which isn't exactly true, although the small number of times it has happened—including hits by the Shirelles, Supremes, Donna Summer, and Whitney Houston—indicates that it is a phenomenon dominated by girl groups and soul divas.) The singles, "I'm So Into You" and "Weak"—sandwiched between Janet Jackson and P.M. Dawn on the charts—have both gone gold and sent SWV's debut album, *It's About Time*, beyond the platinum mark. During the first week in June, "Weak" sold 50,000 copies in one day. They've taped *Top of the Pops* in London and charmed Arsenio off his own stage. And *It's About Time* is reportedly the favorite record at Sony Music chief Tommy Mottola's house, which of course he shares with Mariah Carey, but that's another story.

Obviously SWV can sing (the acronym stands for Sisters With Voices), but that alone doesn't explain their staggering and sudden success. Plenty of girls growing up in urban neighborhoods develop beautiful voices while singing in church; not many turn out to be Whitney Houston. Lead vocalist Cheryl, who is called Coko "for the color of my skin, my cocoa complexion," grew up an only child in the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. She sang in church, listened to Jennifer Holliday and gospel singers like the Clark Sisters, and met Tamara (whose nickname is Taj, her initials). They put a group together, modeled it after New Edition, and called themselves Female Edition. Not because they ever had plans to make a record but because they wanted to meet New Edition, to date them.

During high school, Coko moved with her mother, a gospel singer, to the South Bronx. There she met Lelee (Leanne) through family friends. (As Lelee explains it, "My sister is Coko's godsister.") Lelee and Coko formed a gospel group with some other girls but scrapped it for R&B, which is "just more us," says Coko.

RCA's Ortiz heard Coko's voice—elastic, soulful, a little aggressive—on SWV's demo tape. It fit into his master plan: to find a female equivalent of Jodeci or Guy. After Ortiz heard the trio in the studio, he thought the fluid blend of all three voices, the girls' natural confidence, and the female strength implicit in many of the smooth, sexy ballads would distinguish SWV from their peers, the seemingly endless blur of girl groups from En Vogue to Expose.

"They've got an aggressive edge," he says. "Like when Aaron Hall [formerly of Guy] sings, it's the ad libs that make you believe what you hear." The slow, snapping track "Anything" does snund remarkably like Guy's "Let's Chill," while the scat at the end of "I'm So Into You" (which is about infidelity from the other woman's perspective) is a lot like Hall's impromptu growls.

On paper, such new girl groups as Jade and TLC may seem virtually interchangeable with SWV (ironically, TLC was SWV's original name—the letters are the girls' initials—but the Atlanta-based trio beat them to the punch by a matter of days). In look and sound, though, TLC come across as mischievous little girls, while Jade's come-hither stylization is the complete opposite of SWV's unstudied, tomboyish soul.

It's also hard to imagine a lot of girl groups assertive enough to record a song like "Downtown," a sexy, forthright confrontation with a black male taboo: oral sex. "We're taking a stand for the ladies," says Taj, "telling the guys that this is the '90s. We're allowed to ask for what we want. And we're allowed to get what we want." The girls want "Downtown" to be their next and fourth single.

The first single, "Right Here," was largely ignored by pop radio when it was released a year ago. But some black stations, like KMJM in St. Louis and WJLB in Detroit, pushed it. "SWV was launched through black radio," says Roland Edison, vice-president of promotion at RCA. And clearly, black radio wields more and more influence over pop as more black music crosses over to the Top 10.

"Pop radio has even started looking for urban product earlier than black stations do," says Edison. "We wanted an urban youth audience," says Ortiz, "and that's what pop stations want now. Because now white kids from the suburbs can relate to black kids from the Bronx." When "I'm So Into You" came out in January, pop radio, not to mention MTV, ran with it.

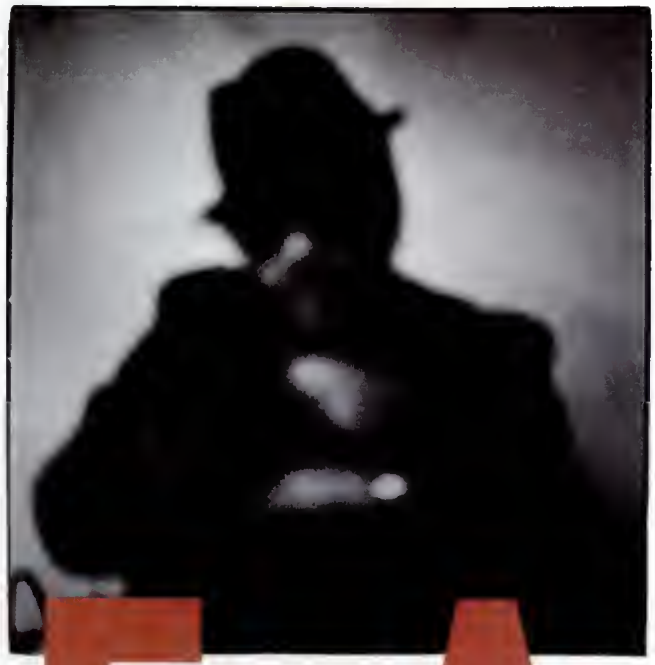
As for the overlooked "Right Here," it was recently remixed by Allstar and Teddy Riley (whose remix of "I'm So Into You" also helped launch that single), with samples from Michael Jackson's "Human Nature" for use in the movie *Free Willy*, produced by Jackson's company. But don't expect all the hullabaloo to change SWV.

At headquarters, they giggle in the hallways, stopping to say hello to everyone, right down to the interns. Taj even lets a woman from production feel her toned thigh. "I've been working out," she says, flexing a bicep. Though Coko—who's very tall, looks vaguely like Ruth Pointer, and doesn't remove her dark sunglasses—seems a little removed, together SWV act like sisters with the day off. And that may be their ultimate appeal. "We don't have no real image," says Lelee. "We're just being ourselves—girls from around the way."

ILLUSTRATION BY EDMUND GUY

WE REAL COOL

Photographs by Melodie McDaniel





We Jazz June...—Gwendolyn Brooks

yes. Especially in the night.



COOL AND THE GANG. *This page:* Rapper **C Flavor** wears tank by Jockey; trousers by Jasper Conran; suspenders and hat both at The Family Jewels. Poet and rapper **Amber Sunshower** of **Groove Garden** wears vinyl jacket and turtleneck both from Product by Elaine Kim; pants by b. moody; cap by Artichoke Design; sneakers at Woolworth's. **Fuze**, of **Screaming Headless Torsos**, wears suit and polo both by Paul Smith. Singer and musician **Me'Shell NdegéOcello** keeps things in check. *Opposite page:* **Sonny Sharrock**, the father of free-jazz guitar, wears leather jacket and pants both at Screaming Mimi's; turtleneck by Gap; shades by Alain Mikli; hat at The Family Jewels; shoes by Na Na. Details, page 138.

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LADY SINGS THE BLUES. *This page:* STEPPIN' TO THE MIKE, **Amber** wears a dress by b. moody; necklace by Erickson Beamon at Showroom Seven; scarf by Flyte Ostell. **Annette Daniela Taylor** wears dress by CD Greene; bracelet at Screaming Mimi's. *Opposite page (top to bottom):* THE REFLECTION OF SOUL, **Me'Shell** wears suit by Dolce & Gabbana; shirt at The Family Jewels; tank from Jockey; glasses by Alain Mikli. TOUGHER IN LEATHER, **Annette** wears leather coat from Callaghan; dress by Flyte Ostell. **Amber**'s outfit, see previous page. SETTING A NEW DOOR POLICY, **Me'Shell** wears a suit by Callaghan; turtleneck by Dolce & Gabbana; and tenor sax sensation **Joshua Redman** wears suit by Jasper Conran; shirt by Moschino; shades by Alain Mikli. Details, page 138.

As black as the night we are,
made blacker still (our skin, our eyes,
our hair) through our style.





That style's bass line: black, made
not at all basic by the cut, the flair, the
sartorial ease with which we enter this
blackness like a second skin, like the night.
It's cool like that. And like this:
no imitative properties about this style—
the first lesson in any understanding of our
black aesthetic: you can't imitate a soul,
a sound, a look: mess with mine and yours
will definitely be a mess. Like Chet Baker
ttying to project what Miles could convey
with the flicker of a lip

on beyond-cool brass; like
Blossom Dearie singing *I'm Hip* as
Billie put on a black turtleneck,
black capris, and had somebody else
shine her hair so that she could
then turn to the mike and say,
ushering in the Voice of Cool, in her
inimitable way: "You've changed."



Our voices, sounds: as black as that piano thump thump thumping under Art Tatum's diabolical dexterity as BeBop made the transition to Cool: Thelonious Monk's *now-dig* phrasing, neckties and berets; Mary Lou Williams's white-piano-key smile amidst that plethora of blackness (her face); Cecil Taylor resting Hip on one hip and the (then) baby of Progressive Jazz on the other as his fingers sailed past it all, into *pure* sound.





We real cool, yes, a continuum—not *homage* —of that night when cool was born to be reborn and raised as something beyond singular definition, belonging to the night, our black selves cutting shapes like stars in it.
—*Hilton Als*

Stylist, Brigitte Echols. Makeup, Roxanna Floyd for Zoli Illusions.

Grooming, Pascal Lewis for WJK/NYC



NIGHT AND DAY. *This page:* POISED AND READY, **Me'Shell** wears dress by b. moody. *Opposite page:* TAKING JAZZ MATTERS INTO HIS OWN HANDS, bassist **Christian McBride** wears coat by Emporio Armani; shirt by Club Room; tie by Romeo Gigli; glasses by Alain Mikli. Details, page 138.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ISA BRIT·

GEAR

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The faces of PNB NATION—Brue, Sung, Bluster, West, and Zulu—are also a more realistic mix than the stereotype we usually see in the media, a genuinely multicultural mirror of hip hop. All but one of PNB NATION are graffiti artists, but to define them as such is to misrepresent them. These kids go beyond graffiti by fusing words and images into something that's harder to decipher or label.

PNB NATION says it's about the vibe, the culture, the experience—not just about the clothes. It comes down to each individual's interpretation: I may see one thing and you may see something else, but that's the point. Everyone who lives "the street" lives it differently.—*Mimi Valdés*

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REDDER THAN RED

In 1987, reggae superstar Peter Tosh was mysteriously murdered. In 1993, many questions remain. Gary Dauphin reviews the documentary *Stepping Razor—Red X*.

I'M PART OF A GENERATION FOR WHICH an affinity for Peter Tosh over Bob Marley is a sign you take yourself for some kind of expert. Where Marley was reggae's Fidel and patron saint, Tosh was its Che Guevara, whose war against enemies seen and unseen led to his inevitable martyrdom. The Tosh I recall was what used to be called a "reggae superstar," back when that title reflected more than a string of hit singles: a wild, spliff-smoking Rastafarian given to confronting evil forces—political and otherwise. Not quite the celebrated, exotic entertainer who performed "(You Gotta Walk) Don't Look Back" with Mick Jagger on *Saturday Night Live* in 1978. Peter Tosh was murdered in 1987 under circumstances mysterious enough to put him in the same renegade pantheon as Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, and Bruce Lee. All of which makes for a very superficial knowledge of the man. What's largely missing for me is Peter himself.

Enter *Stepping Razor—Red X* (Northern Arts), Nicholas Campbell's feature-length documentary about Peter Tosh, taking part of its title from the singer's classic song of defiance: "I'm a stepping razor, don't watch my size I'm dangerous." Campbell allows us to encounter Tosh firsthand by using his resonating baritone as the film's only narration. The voice is taken from a series of microcassettes—the "Red X" tapes—recorded by Tosh for an intended autobiography shortly before his death.

Opening with a black screen and silence, followed by a clip from the tapes, *Stepping Razor* uses the gravity of the singer's speaking voice to pull you in and, once there, propel you forward on a trip through Tosh's many moods. We get to hear the meditative, brooding, convincing Peter Tosh, someone who stayed up nights nursing a jay and thinking about his place in the universe. Colonialism, the music industry, politics, the demons that tried to strangle him in his sleep—Tosh's talk wanders before it makes its inevitable sense, which is fine because in *Stepping Razor* the journey's the thing.

Surprisingly, for a movie about a musician, there's little concern for music here, in that none of the songs are ever played out from beginning to end. Music is subtext, background, and segue. Instead of music, the bulk of the soundtrack is the songwriter recounting the story of his life, offering more of a spliffed-out psychological portrait than a straight chronology. So we get to hear Tosh, an avid martial artist, remembering his song "Oh Bumbo Klaat" as arising out of a specific spiritual awakening, where yelling this Jamaican expletive freed him from the paralyzing grip of social propriety as well as actual evil spirits. And we come to understand the other meaning of the title: Whenever Tosh saw his signature on official documents, he envisioned a red X next to it. Tosh never knew exactly who was making the mark but he had his ideas: the vampires, the "shitstem," the global conspiracy of Babylon.



Peter Tosh nurses a jay and confronts the "shitstem."

Tosh's inner view is supplemented by re-enactments of childhood scenes, the Red X sessions, the murder; archival footage of the sights and sound of Trench Town in the '60s; home videos of Marley, Tosh, and Bunny Wailer in the last days of The Wailers trio; and interviews with friends and observers. The appearance of Tosh's parents brings his Stepping Razor mystique back down to earth: his mother mourns her great son's untimely passing; his father seemingly acknowledges his dead son for the first time.

There is a funky rhythm at work in *Stepping Razor*. For all the information it gives, the only date mentioned is that of the murder: September 11, 1987. This is an oddly appropriate way to approach Tosh, as the lack of a conventional timeline reflects the free-wheeling path he often took in his own probing discourse. My Peter Tosh would have appreciated that kind of method. His first solo album after leaving Bob Marley & the Wailers was *Legalize It*, whose title song was a no-joke anthem about the benefits of marijuana ("Legalize it and I will advertise it," he chanted). That kind of overtly antiestablishment position and his volatile public persona would often bring the wrath of Jamaica's authorities down on his head. Campbell gets a good deal of mileage out of the mix of herbal Johnny Appleseed and Third World outlaw, sometimes forgetting that there's a gap between the image and what actually happened.

For instance, there's a scene in which Tosh seems to be upstaging Marley at the One Love Peace Concert in Kingston, Jamaica, in April 1978. Marley is shown in a brief, unflattering shot, seemingly overjoyed by bringing together then prime minister Michael Manley and then challenger Edward Seaga, political enemies whose '78 election battle spilled out into street warfare. Tosh comes on and makes what seems to be a terse, buzz-killing statement, reminding everyone that "peace is the diploma you get in the cemetery," that Jamaica is still colonial territory, and that Seaga and Manley are hardly men of the people.

It's an amazing moment. The problem is Tosh came on *before* Marley that night in Kingston. And the brief statement was really part of a meandering tirade aimed (like Tosh's ever-present spliff) at the dignitaries seated front and center, but offscreen in the film. (Several months later, Tosh was accosted in the street by police officers and beaten unconscious. No charges were ever filed against Tosh.)

Campbell's recasting of this event is needless padding, a lot less affecting than the re-creations that purport to show us the world through Tosh's own eyes: shots of the Trench Town slums of his boyhood, children running along the beach and through the streets, the sun arc'ing overhead as Tosh's voice drones ghost-like through the mix. There is no way to ever mistake these scenes for "facts," so they ironically

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become the most compelling parts of the film. This is the Tosh from the most intimate parts of the Red X tapes, re-creation and montage opening his head up and letting us look inside. Better than merely looking at Tosh's life, these moments make us fellow travelers with the singer, and although they are basically fictions, they create a "Peter Tosh" we imagine only Peter himself could have known. So at one point we see Tosh as a boy running into a barbed-wire fence along the beach. He cuts his eyelid open, and the Red X tapes reveal that the bloody slit was like a window through which he could see the devil and all his works. Over time, Tosh came to see that as a defining moment. It revealed to him that his life would be a constant battle against Satanic forces who had for some reason chosen to test his faith. For Tosh, that fight became a grudge match.

Those illuminating moments unfortunately come fewer and fewer as the film approaches its end. Such scenes go a long way toward fleshing out the inexorable link between the spiritual and political forces Tosh saw; his words have been saying that all along, now we see it's true. But *Stepping Razor* gives up thinking about such problems when it starts to deal with the questions around Tosh's murder. One talking head follows another. And many theories are advanced: drugs, politics, crime, bad luck, destiny. None of them is very compelling. *Stepping Razor* starts to drag its feet, unable to make the kind of connections that inspired Tosh to his greatest, most provocative moments. Campbell resorts to the stuff of your average episode of *Cops*: a reenactment of the crime, close-ups of Tosh's bullet wounds, pictures of his corpse, the tearful testimony of his wife, and so forth. Having spent almost two hours dropping science for the audience, he becomes just another mute black corpse. Yet in life Tosh was anything but mute; he had the nerve to give public voice to what other Trench Town youths spoke in low tones or not at all. If *Stepping Razor—Red X* falls short at the very end, it's mainly because Peter Tosh is no longer here to tell us what's what.

Gary Dauphin is a freelance journalist and screenwriter.

THE LOST BOYS

What's wrong with growing up in the suburbs? *Amongst Friends* gives Manohla Dargis some answers.

A coming-of-age cautionary, Rob Weiss's debut feature, *Amongst Friends* (Fine Line), tracks the exploits of a few white boys from Long Island, alienated youth whose existential torment is as shallow as their pockets are deep. Their demographics may be blueprints for upper-middle-class mastery—collegelawschoolwifekidshouse—but these are Reagan Age children, hurtling down a different road toward the American Dream.

Amongst Friends cranks up like some long-lost home movie, scratched and specked with dirt. The opening voice-over fondly recalls, "There were three of us." In silhouette Billy, Trevor, and Andy tumble through the frame, while Andy's rapid-fire delivery riffs on life in Long Island and "16-year-old Jewish kids thinkin' and actin' like they're Flavor Flav." Or so they want to believe. Cut to a couple more scenic layovers—callow teens one minute, callous adults the next—until the film finally stutters to a start with Trevor's return home from jail. While he's been contemplating life beyond iron bars, Andy's been on the hustle, Billy's been making like Joe Pesci's Tommy DeVito, and most everyone else has gone off to school.

Writer/director Rob Weiss is the latest in a line of fledgling auteurs who came of age with one finger on the VCR PAUSE button and another itching to jump-start a movie camera. Although Weiss doesn't have the aesthetic chops of Nick Gomez, Quentin Tarantino, or the Hughes brothers, he's clearly worshiped at the feet of the same video godhead. Martin Scorsese—especially *GoodFellas*—informs virtually every nuance of *Amongst Friends*, from Andy's speedball voiceover to the swooping camera that closes in on Billy as he leans on the competition.



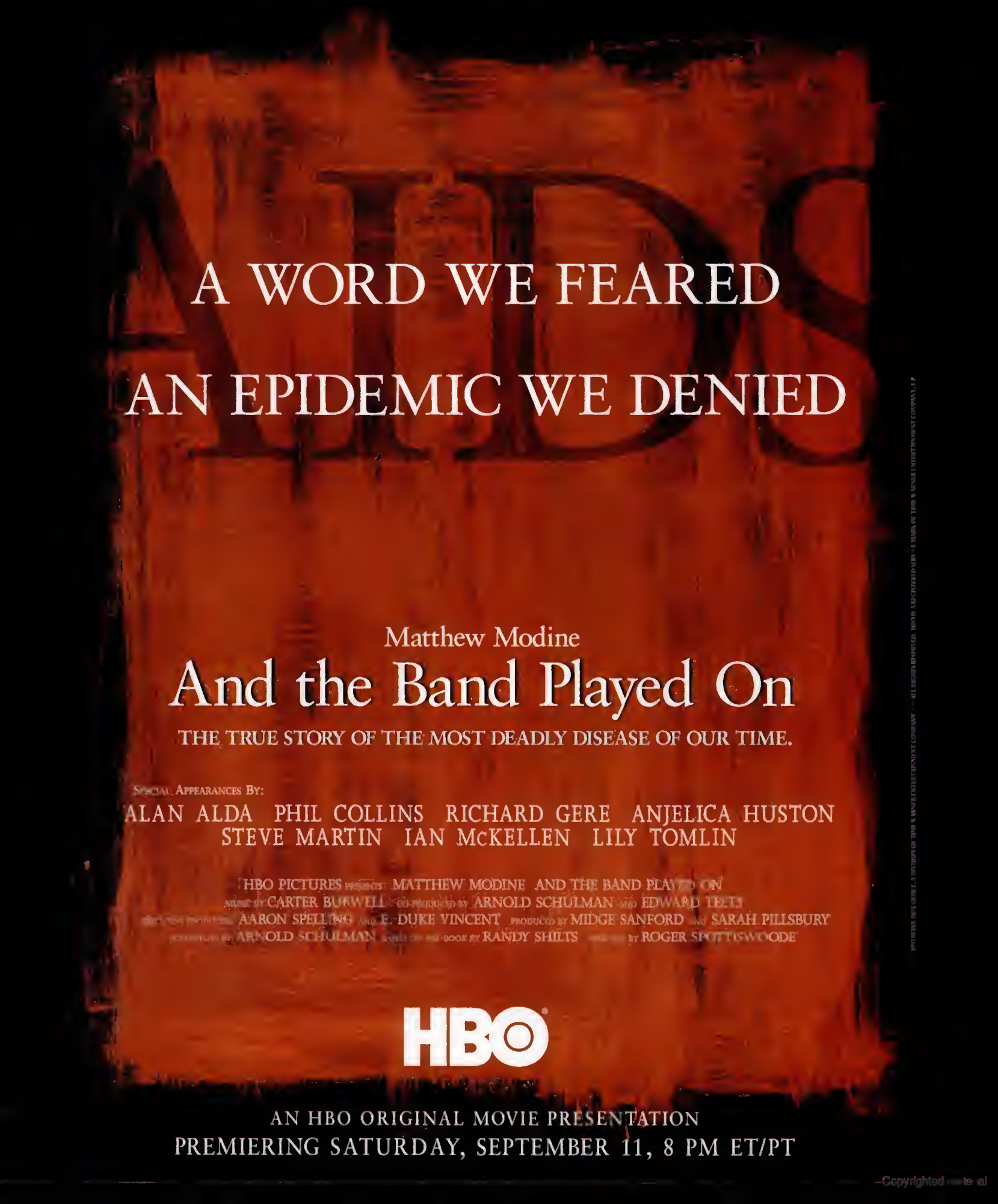
Trevor and Friend back from jail and still looking for a way out.

Violence and macho gone amok are the obvious lures in Scorsese's work. What acolytes conveniently ignore, though, is the director's religious passions—problems of the divine being considerably less action-packed than, say, shoving a Glock in someone's mouth. Still, if faith has limited appeal for filmmakers, Scorsese's mean streets have all the fullness of an authenticated life, which is irresistible for young directors looking to give characters meaning.

One Big Lie of white culture is that diversity is the same thing as (consumer) choice. Like a lot of kids, Weiss's characters struggle in an identity vacuum, one created at the mall but stoked on unconscious anxiety about race, class, sex, ethnicity. These are the children of the mainstream, as radically assimilated and desperately unhappy as they are privileged. So what if dad's a lawyer? Junior just wants to be like his gangster granddaddy ("real men," Andy reverentially dubs them), who toughed it out in the ghetto with accent and historical memories intact. Never mind college (much less yeshiva), these upper-middle-class mercenaries flirt with danger, brandish guns, and brag how "it's happenin' here, man, shit's happenin' everywhere." It's the multicultural '90s and the only way for a white man to feel alive is to either give a bullet or take one.

In the world of *Amongst Friends*, criminality equals identity—"I shoot, therefore I am." Despite some sparks of irony, Weiss buys into a logic that constructs life as more genuine, more real, because it's flecked with grit just like that bit of home movie he unwinds at the beginning of the film. Truth is, the difference between *Amongst Friends* and the hard, cold nihilism of *Menace II Society* is as vast as that between a Long Island suburb and Watts, one rarely, if ever, measured in movie-made America.

Manohla Dargis writes about film and lives in New York City.



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HAYWIRED

From NBA celebrity to cocaine addict. In *Spencer Haywood: The Rise, The Fall, The Recovery*, Nelson George finds a man perpetually on the rebound.

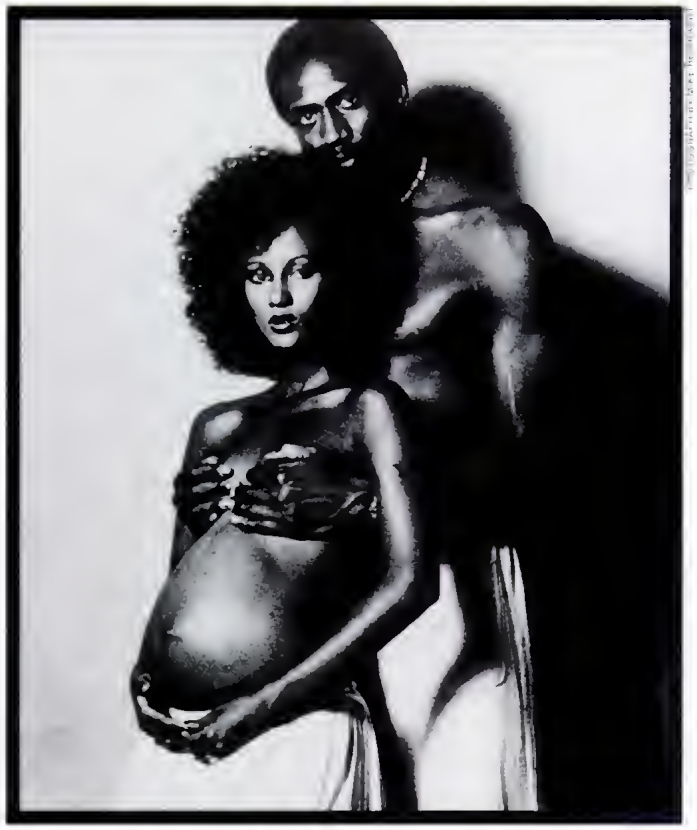
THESE DAYS BASKETBALL AND HIP HOP seem as natural together as rice and peas. Shaq's got a record deal with Jive. B-ball is a staple in videos from Kurtis Blow to Diamond Dee. And Michael Jordan's baggy trunks arguably sparked today's loose-fit street sryle.

But for a previous generation of b-ball junkies, the game was synonymous with jazz. Where now the slam dunk connects basketball with in-yo'-face attitude, for "heavy" '70s bloods, the defiantly black, improvisational sounds of John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, Roland Kirk, and Ornette Coleman defined the game's flow for the "in" crowd. For all soul's mass appeal, many in the black-power era thought jazz represented a heightened awareness, a hipness, a sophistication that soul couldn't articulate. For those with Afros, turtlenecks, and sideburns, jazz went perfectly with challenging the establishment, being a player (with the opposite sex, that is) and sniffin' coke—all very popular activities for African American ball players in the days before the malling of the NBA.

For no one was this more true than NBA great Spencer Haywood. A fitting icon for all that was mellow and messed up about basketball from the late '60s to the early '80s, Haywood provided the blueprint for the caricature of the greedy multimillionaire black jock that's become a sports-page motif. His game was always heavily informed by jazz, which made him resistant to regimentation. "First we got into our mood with some jazz," he writes of his powerhouse high school team in his autobiography, *Spencer Haywood: The Rise, The Fall, The Recovery* (Amistad Press, 284 pages, black & white photos). "We knew we were very cool. Detroit was in the midst of the Motown revolution; evetyone was listening to Stevie Wonder, and the Temptations, and the Supremes, and here we were groovin' to a higher order of music, preparing our minds for the battle. Then we'd go out and, cool as Miles Davis, annihilate the other team."

The book, written with former *L.A. Times* scribe Scott Ostler, chronicles Haywood's winding journey from southern poverty to Big City celebrity (complete with a supermodel wife—Iman) to middle-American respectability. Over the course of a stellar, star-crossed career this lanky Mississippi native played many roles—American hero, Uncle Tom, threat to the game's existence, franchise player, malcontent, lucky in love, unlucky in love, and coke fiend. As literature, Haywood's autobiography isn't as compelling as Bill Russell's often metaphysical *Second Wind* and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's spiritual *Giant Steps*, but the brother's got a strong story to tell.

Raised dirt poor and shoeless, at age 15 Haywood's on-court prowess won him a trip north that ended in Detroit. There he fell under the paternal guidance of Pershing High's legendary coach Will Robinson. With Robinson's prodding, Haywood developed the multidimensional game that would become both his gift and his curse. Nearly six-foot-eight in high school, Haywood already had superior ball-handling skills and a steady long-range jumper. He could play inside like a center or dribble past defenders like a smaller man. With 'Trane in the locker room and dominance on the court he seemed poised for a strong college career before heading into the NBA.



To Haywood and Iman, their late-disco-'70s marriage was "a chance to improve the world."

In the spring of 1968, the most tumultuous year of this century's second half, history interceded. Educator Harry Edwards continued to urge black athletes to boycott the summer Olympics in Mexico City in protest of U.S. racial injustice. Many big-name black athletes, including then Lew Alcindor (now Kareem Abdul-Jabbar), complied. Sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos participated but shocked the world by giving a black-power salute after receiving their gold medals. It's fashionable now to remember the '60s as a time of total black rebellion, but the innate moral and political conservatism of many African Americans also manifested itself. In response to Smith and Carlos, George Foreman waved a small American flag around the Mexico City ring after winning the heavyweight gold medal.

Haywood, attending a Colorado junior college at the time, also showed his loyalty. Though a relative stringbean compared with the bulky, older Europeans, Haywood's speed and agility helped the U.S. to capture the gold. Nationalists attacked him as an Uncle Tom but, like Foreman, Haywood had bought the American Dream: "The Olympics also represent the best of America—a chance for a nobody, with hard work and talent, to become a hero; and a chance for a Black man or woman to demonstrate the worth and quality of the African-American race."

Haywood returned a national hero. And, if he'd stayed in college, everything would have been just fine. He would have slipped right back into the system and played his last two undergrad years at some big-time basketball school. But Haywood turned out to be as much a capitalist as a patriot. Eager to cash in on his national celebrity (and because the NBA barred underclassmen), Haywood signed a multimillion-dollar deal with the

Continued on page 116

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THE OTHER SEATTLE

In the city famous for grunge and good cappuccino, Joe Wood finds a quiet storm brewing.

FROM THE FAR END OF THE mall I can make out Silver Shadow D's hungry face. It is Tuesday afternoon and the air is as warm as a new ghost—it is always about to rain in Seattle. When I approach, D hands a homemade cassette to one of his friends. I smile and D smiles but I can still see the hunger in his flesh.

We stand close to the car with the music. D has already briefed his buddies about who I am, so everyone is working his best angle. "We're in the wilderness out here," says Doe, his weight against the car's trunk. A barber by profession, Doe is the wise one. "The birth of hip hop was in the ghetto. We don't got no ghettto."

Judging from the looks of our surroundings, Doe is right. The Central Area District is where many of Seattle's black people live, but it is not the kind of ghetto you see back East. Black people make up only 10 percent of the population; the city is mostly white, Asian, and Hispanic. The whites consider themselves liberal—they've elected a black mayor, Norm Rice ("White Rice" to some), and again named Seattle's county "King," this time after the dead civil rights leader. They have also stayed here with their giant money bags, so black living conditions are, as a rule, superior to those in most of the nation's cities.

D tells me looks can be deceptive. "There's streets and real niggas in Seattle." Except for the barber shop, the mall is desolate, like most of the commercial strips in the area. The fellas all work small jobs or do "other things."

A spliff appears and D offers a hit. I pass and he says, "Don't apologize, man." There is a certain fluid electricity in his voice. "It's alright," he whispers. To my left, a well-groomed brother named 206K says the problem with hip hop here is distribution and promotion. We're making music, but the only people who get to listen to it are right here. This spot and places like it are the music in Seattle. They don't want us here.

The driver of the car hangs his foot out the door, then switches tapes. I say Seattle has produced two nationally known rappers, Sir Mix-A-Lot and Digable Planets' Butterfly, and that's more than some larger cities can claim. No one wants to talk about Mix—they say he hasn't helped anybody (even though Mix produced a compilation of Seattle rap, due out in August). I ask why nobody's started a hip hop club in the city, even a small juke. Before anyone can answer a cop car appears; the spliff is tucked away and we get to whispering about the police.



Big kids don't sway: "Acid Jazz" night at Re-bar, where the crowd is never too black.

Once there were hip hop clubs in Seattle, but that day is come and gone. It's not because grunge rock competed them out of existence: Seattlites pronounced "grunge" dead five years ago, and it never really captured the attention of young African Americans anyway. Hip hop had been the shit since DJ Nasry Nes started cutting rap singles on the air back in 1981. The music was welcomed with an easy embrace—the CD had seen Jimi Hendrix's blues spring from its clubs in the early '60s, and before that it had housed the northernmost points of the West Coast jazz circuit. Hip hop, like its older cousins, was weaned on the CD's black thighs—and just like them it left momma's lap as soon as it got big enough to jump.

Which only means that rap in Seattle was part of the main demographic flow of '80s rap: up from black and into America. In Seattle the assimilation is particularly noticeable because of the small size of the city's African American community—and its failure to stake out its own places in the cultural landscape. Last year, Seattle's only club devoted to the sub-20 and black crowd, Matrixx, closed after numerous accounts of fighting spurred local authorities to pass an "emergency" ordinance to chase the place away.

Matrixx left nothing in its wake. Today, you can listen to rap at the occasional contest sponsored by innocous organizations like the Boy's Club, or you can go to the "black nights" at one of the white clubs in town, where the music is rarely performed, and the crowds are always mixed: Asian, Latino, white, black, but never too black. These mixers are carefully composed: clubs call them "R&B" or "world beat" nights, assiduously avoiding the terms "rap" or "hip hop." You hear the same top tunes again and again, you run into the same nice multiculti people again and again. You become a traveling band: first stop, RKCNDY; next, Papagayo's on Monday; then Re-bar on Wednesdays; and on to Pier 70 on Thursdays.

The night I met D he'd convinced Pier 70's DJ to let him take the mike. The club was sedate: there were Neneh Cherry posters plastered all over the walls, and Dr. Dre and DJ Quik were in heavy rotation—minus the jeep beats. Most everyone seemed older than their ages; they were in their early 20s, but they danced as neatly as grandparents. They swayed. There was something dead in the air—the moment before I heard D's voice I was pretty sure something was missing.

I crept to the edge of the floor, keeping an eye on some gangsters nearby. You could see they were real niggas. Several Thursdays afterward, one of them would shoot a gun in the air in a parking lot near the club. There had never been any problem inside Pier 70, but the gunshot was enough for the police to recommend the club reconsider its black night; SeaFirst Bank, the landlords of the club's property, quickly ordered Pier 70 to stop the R&B.

Though safety is a legitimate concern, there's no reason to believe cracking down on clubs actually combats the city's more stubborn problems. Despite Seattle's boomtown ghettolessness, resulting both from the phenomenal growth of Microsoft and the perennial strength of Boeing, the city struggles with many of the problems most U.S. urban areas face: rising unemployment in the unskilled labor pool, especially among young African Americans; persistent patterns of residential and


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educational segregation; and troubled neighborhood economies, particularly in black communities like the Central Area District.

I checked out the gunslingers again: they could have been D or Doe or his friends. They were not like the rest of the crowd, the majority of our crowd, a picture-perfect "melting pot," as well-behaved as model children. Like all port cities, Seattle is a soup of migrants, immigrants, and travelers. Unlike other towns, Seattle's various groups slide silently under its great white top, no noisy banging allowed—the cops see to this. King County's historical endpoints flashed across my mind like ghosts: dead Indians in the beginning and silenced Negroes now. Was Seattle's "melting pot" just a pretty disguise for the triumph of white *über alles* Others? Was the absent element "black" and the defining element "white"?

When D's voice hit the mike I heard the missing thing. D isn't even the best rapper in Seattle, but there is electricity in his voice. I notice it again later at the mall, an intense engagement, like soul, but different. Feel the dead ancestors all around—when you sleep or walk or dance in Seattle you dance with them: soul, a conversation with spirits, is thrust upon you. It threatens and promises like rain, everywhere—yet this soul is not the special thing I catch in D's voice. His electricity is lifted from the voices of Huck Finn and Slick Rick in equal parts, a child's mean curiosity, a reaching for life. It is the picaro's hunger.

It's more precious than race or the ghetto: it is about being alive. I looked around the mall—it is vety gray. After D and Doe and his friends finish talking, and we say goodbye, D says he will take me to his house. He lives in an affluent Jewish section of town and we have to drive to get there. The skies get clearer and the air a little fresher as we leave the CD; first you start to see the mountains and then maybe a little sea. We stop at a ranch-style house with a small green yard out front.

It is very pretty. D carefully explains why he has street credentials despite the appearance: This is his aunt's place, his mom was a crack addict, he has seen it all. I look at his picaro face. It's alright, I almost say, it's alright—no need to apologize.

Down in the basement, D moves some junk from a chair so I can sit. The air is heavy and still. D presses some buttons on his loop machines, tells me he's going to rap over the beats. He opens his eyes and looks at a point over my head. This is a rubber-band-and-glue operation, but I keep patient, I inhale some thick air, I put my hands on my knees. I wait. Suddenly the beats kick in and the words are tumbling out, breaking the dead air like a stick—D wants you to know King County has the hunger, too, how quietly this city battles loud voices like his.

Joe Wood writes frequently about race, culture, and politics for The Village Voice *and* Esquire. *He is currently writing a book about his family for Little, Brown.*

Word – Continued from page 112
American Basketball Association's Denver Rockets in 1969.

The ABA was the brainchild of several frustrated millionaires who had been denied entry to the established National Basketball Association. Where the older league was dominated by the stern, scowling Bill Russell (the NBA's first black head coach) and his Boston Celtics, the ABA was a circus of renegades, rejects, and misfits happily firing away from three-point land with a red-white-and-blue ball.

Haywood's contract was an unprecedented breach of athletic decorum that outraged the sports establishment and threatened the cozy relationship between the NCAA and the NBA. Though it was white millionaires who offered him the cash, Haywood bore the brunt of the criticism for taking it. Despite the flak, Haywood dominated the ABA's third season, winning the Rookie of the Year and Most Valuable Player awards.

One of capitalism's great gifts is its willingness to break with tradition whenever there's money to be made. So in violation of the NBA prohibition on signing underclassmen, teams began brokering for his services. The Sonics finally signed him to a six-year, $1.5 million deal and precipitated a legal battle with the NBA that reached the Supreme Court.

In a 7-to-2 decision the justices ruled in Haywood's favor, a victory that led to the hardship draft and the regular flow of underclass collegians into the pros. It would also, indirectly, help accelerate the rise of basketball salaries to their current, dizzying heights as the NBA and ABA teams competed to sign unproved college boys. For the many fans who didn't bother to follow the case, Haywood was now totally transformed from Olympic hero to villainous black millionaire. With the notable exception of Jabbar, with whom he shared a deep interest in jazz, many NBA players and coaches resented both his legal triumph and his piles of cash.

As other players joined the millionaires' club, Haywood seemed less of a demon, but turmoil always hovered near. During four all-star years in Seattle, Haywood soared and scored with ease. But through a series of coaches, including Bill Russell, Haywood's game was tinkered with by men who didn't understand it. Haywood, Connie Hawkins, Earl "the Pearl" Monroe, and a few others were bringing a jazzy, experimental, straight-out-the-schoolyard style to a predominantly white old-school league. It was one thing to try a 360° dunk and miss in the ABA, but it was quite another to miss that shot on the venerable court of Madison Square Garden. Playground vs. classroom, "give and go" vs. "pick and roll." Eventually the two would fuse (Magic Johnson, for example, became a master of both), but in the mid to late '70s the battle lines were clearly drawn.

In 1976, the year of the ABA-NBA merger, Haywood was traded to the still-glamorous but crumbling New York Knicks. Three years removed from their last title, the team still boasted the superb backcourt of Walt Frazier and Earl Monroe, but the frontcourt was in shambles. The pressure was on to revive the team and Haywood would become one of several unsuccessful saviors. He and Frazier never got along (he thought Frazier's notoriously loud clothes were "costumes"), though he liked Monroe and the future Senator Bill Bradley.

While the Knicks continued their downward slide, Haywood entered another phase—Big Apple celebrity. He dressed well. He got invited to Studio 54 and Regine's. He deejayed weekly at a jazz station. Most importantly, Haywood wooed and wedded one of the world's most celebrated beauties, the Somalian model Iman. Before the Haywood-Iman union, black celebrity marriages had been covered primarily in black newspapers and Johnson Publications. But her high profile, their New York base, and the novelty of a black American marrying an African made them internationally known. They wed in the late disco '70s, but the rhetoric of their romance sounded like the Afrocentric '90s: "We convinced ourselves that this was as much a mission as a marriage. We had a chance ro improve the world. We were going to merge our two cultures, African and Afro-American, for the betterment of both."

The marriage would be the last good thing in Haywood's life for a long time. He was gulaged to basketball Siberia—the now-defunct New Orleans franchise—for his failure to resurrect the Knicks, but at Jabbar's urging the Lakers acquired him in 1980. It was the dawn of the Magic era and Haywood knew this was "the chance of a lifetime" to close out his career a champion. But in the most famous snooze in hoop history Haywood fell dead asleep during a practice for the 1980 finals against Philly.

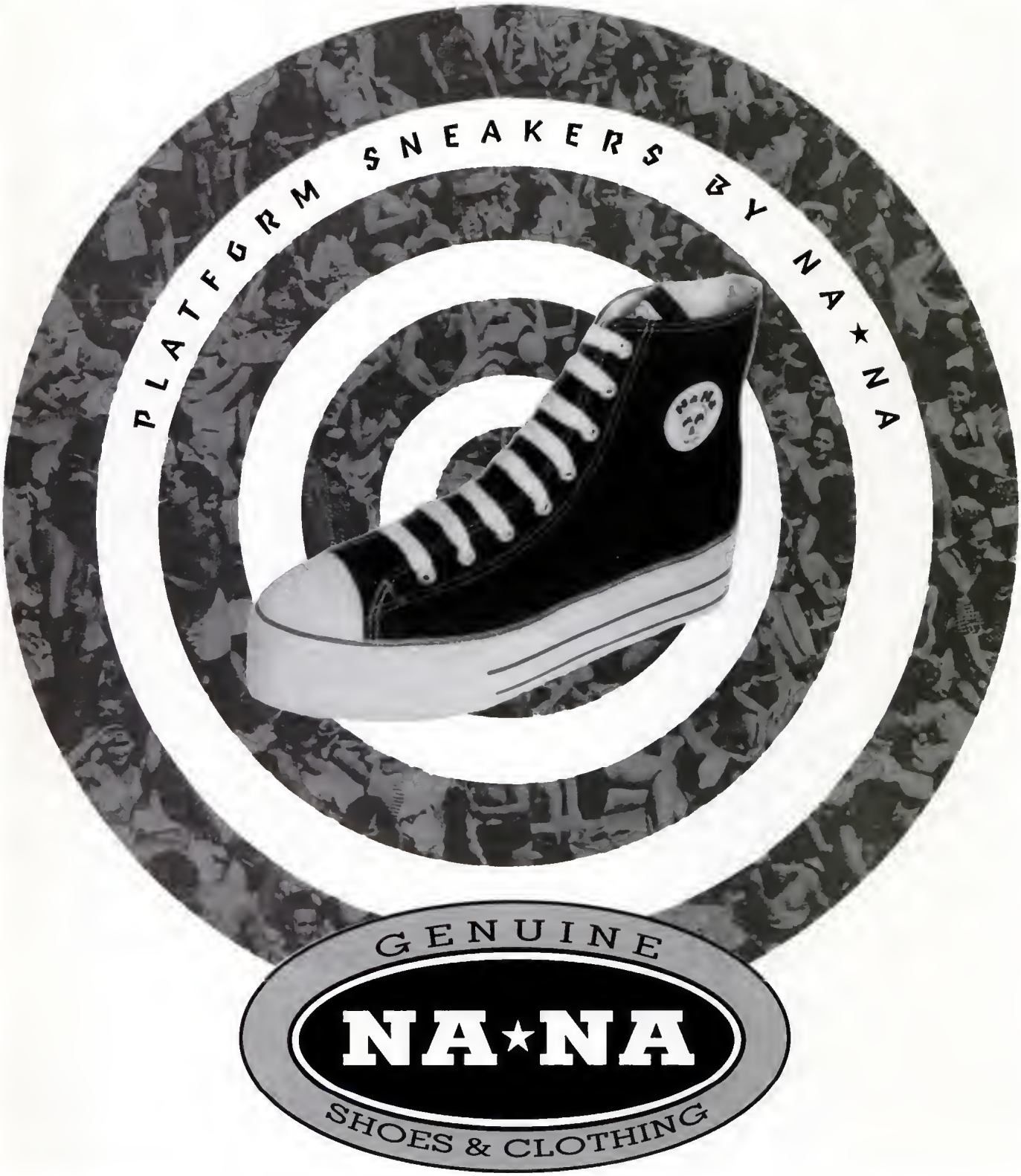
Only then did Haywood's freebase addiction become public. This was the cocaine era of high life, the days before crack's fast-food appeal, when celebrities of every kind were freebasing their careers away. "Basketball became a nuisance," Haywood writes, "and life became a nightmare." In a publicity photo from that season Haywood looks wrinkled, gaunt, and a decade older than he was. His public humiliation during the NBA's showcase event made him one of the saddest symbols of the era: the athlete too busy getting high to play ball.

Haywood was blackballed. His idealistic marriage to Iman ended in bitter divorce. A superficially successful comeback in Italy got him to the Washington Bullets, but his addiction lingered and his once grand career ended poorly. Not until he finally retired and focused on Haywood the civilian, and not Haywood the celebrity, did he begin to build a new life.

Haywood's book could be viewed as a cautionary antidrug tale or hoops history, but its ultimate value is as a chronicle of one black man's inadvertent moral journey. In the '60s he believed, rather innocently, in the opportunities America offered. In the '70s his desire for professional freedom (and a fat check) led him to battle the sports establishment. Later the cocaine culture claimed his mind. And in the post-12 Step '90s, Haywood is a capitalist again—successful, sober, and reflective—a changed man who changed the game.

Nelson George is the author of several books on black culture. His first novel, Urban Romance, *will be published by Putnam in January of 1994.*

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THE ROAD WARRIOR

Graffiti legend Lee Quinones could have been a superstar, but he refused to leave the streets. Brandon Holley tracks his 10-year journey from subway cars to race cars.

THE CAR'S NAME is Mr. Hyde. It's a '64 Dodge Coronet that graffiti artist Lee Quinones has raced for the last five years. As the moniker indicates, the Dodge may look like a granny car, but this full metal jacket carries a big stick. Packed tight with a 440 magnum engine and the words NO PRISONERS written across the rear window, Mr. Hyde runs a quarrer-mile in just over 12 seconds and recently shut out the competition at the Atlantic Mopar Nationals in Englishtown, New Jersey. "I caught the other guy halfway down the quarter and blew through the traps," says Quinones proudly. "It may not look like much, but this car could rip your head off."

When he started painting, Quinones's style messed up a few heads as well. Dubbed the "master of movement" by Keith Haring, Quinones was a spray-can superstar, celebrated in galleries from Soho to Paris, before he got back on the *real* fast track—New York's underground street-racing scene.

He established himself in the midst of the competitive graffiti culture of the mid '70s, painting trains and spreading his style and his tag, LEE, all over the MTA and New York City. Struck by the mysterious artist's work, producer Charlie Ahearn decided to make a film based on the Quinones legend. When Ahearn approached Quinones about playing himself in the movie, he balked at first, fearing that the mass exposure would enable cops to recognize him and interfere with his work.

The landmark *Wild Style*, srarring Quinones, Fab 5 Freddy, and the Rock Steady Crew, came out in 1982 and introduced hip hop's three-pronged artistic attack—graffiti, breakdancing, and rap—to mainstream America. (Impossible to find for years, *Wild Style* is now available on video from Pow Wow Productions, 17 Hubert Street, New York, N.Y. 10013, $29.95.) More comfortable in the searchlight than the spotlight, though, Quinones returned to the street, afraid that the instant popularity of graffiti would reduce his work to novelty status.

"Lee cnuld have had all the celebrity he wanted, but he was very pure in the classic graffiti sense," says Fab 5 Freddy, who painted subway cars with Quinones in the '70s. "He wanted to remain anonymous." Quinones's final show at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery in 1984 was an instant sellout. By then, however, he'd had enough of the art crowd and resumed painting handball courts and subway cars while finally pursuing his lnngtime love of car culture and drag racing.

The New York City srreer-racing ring is amazingly secretive, surfacing in the dead of night on toll and service roads in Brooklyn and Queens. Most of the challenges are made in the garages, where bragging rights can push bets upwards of $50,000. "That's where all the shit goes down," Quinones says. "An instigator will come into a garage if he knows of a hot car and say, 'I know this guy who's gonna shut ynu down.' That's what drives the whole thing."

A match can simmer for as long as a year, but when it happens, it happens fast. Once a time and a place are agreed upon, a quarter-mile section of road is blocked off. The bets take place, the race is run, and in a little over eight seconds everyone disappears before the police can break up the rally.

Quinones now drags primarily in sanctioned races but still instigates high-stakes outlaw matches. It is more than the race itself that continues to fascinate him, it's the whole milieu: the pre-race trash talking in the garages, the dedication the drivers show to their cars, and the sheer terror evident on their faces as they wait for the green.

"I've walked by those cars when they're trembling there on the highway," says Quinones. "It's incredible to see the drivers' eyes bulging out. They're ready ro go out and kill themselves and sometimes they do. It's a look you never see—not at the racetrack. You only see it on the street."

In the past few years, the cars have started to infiltrate his painting. A new series depicts supercars (badass Detroit legends built in the late '60s and early '70s) that threaten to jump off the canvas. For Quinones, the progression from racing to painting is a natural one because he considers his car to be a piece of moving sculpture.

"When I did my trains in the '70s," he says, "I rode on the inside of the subway cars to see people's reactions on the platforms. Driving my car is a sensation of watching people's reactions, too; it's an extension of my art."

Nowadays, Quinones manages to balance the art crowd and car culture, existing somewhere in the middle. "One night I can be hanging out with Julian Schnabel and Madonna," he says, "and the next night I'm out on the street at a race taking shit for not racing my car. What's in between is my arena, my work of art."

As proof, he's already planning his next show. "I want to have my car actually in the gallery," he says. "Start it right up and intoxicate everybody with Cam 2 racing gas. Just give 'em the pulse of a real true American Supercar."



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BARRON CLAIBORNE

Geord yoer grill: "Il may oot look like much, but this car could rip your head off."

Brandon Holley is a senior editor at IN Fashion *magazine. She drives a 1966 Dodge Charger.*

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DA BOMB









KRIS KROSS Da Bomb • *Ruffhouse/Columbie* *by Matt Diehl*

When Kris Kross first blew up, it wasn't hard to see why. They had all the cuteness required of edolescent rappers, and that backwards-clothing business was a clever marketing touch. But where other juvenile crews like Another Bad Creation subsisted on minimal mike skills, familiar samples, and the novelty velue of little kids acting like hardcore roughnecks, Kris Kross could *flow*.

On their breakthrough single "Jump," Mack Daddy and Daddy Mack displayed the predictable squeaky vocals and mini-macho posturing yet rhymed with euthority. The follow-up single, "Warm It Up," displayed another talent: teking e hardcore song or style created by one of their elders—in this case "Warm It Up, Kane" by Big Daddy Kane—and making it digestible for the 4 million-plus youngstas who snapped up *Totally Krossed Out*.

The teen duo's sophomore effort, *Da Bomb*, builds on the successful *Krossed Out* formula, updating it for the current hip hop climate. Kris Kross end whiz-kid producer Jermeine Dupri continue to incorporete other reppers' material into their grooves. They bite Brand Nubian's "Drop The Bomb" for the title track and Run-D.M.C.'s "Here We Go" in "And Ye' Don't Stop–Props to the Ol' School"; on "Take Um Out," they blend Public Enemy's "Shut Em Down" with a Naughty by Nature flavor. Attempting to come correct for '93, Kris Kross add e heevy dancehall influence to their sound and throw off an old-school vibe as trendy as a pair of Pume Clydes.

Since *Totally Krossed Out* exploded two years ego, gangsta rap has taken over the charts, forcing even L.L. Cool J to shout unconvincingly about Tec 9s on his most recent release. And on the underage tip, groups like De Youngsta's and Mobb Deep have upped the ante for street credibility, closely mimicking the lean of gangste originators. No surprise, *Da Bomb* offers state-of-the-art hardness, opening with an Ice Cube sample and pulsing with a hardcore stance and sound. On the title track, Daddy Mack confesses he "just loves taking out punks, homes" over a loping, Too Short-style beat built on pumping bass drums, handclaps, and synthesizer loops.

Kris Kross also nestily revive their feud with Another Bad Creation in en effort to distance themselves from other impish hip hop posses. On "Freek Da Funk," Mack Daddy challenges "that elphabet crew to meke my dey/so I cen drop and chop and drop them little punks quick/and teach 'em to never mess with this Krossed-out kid." Still, despite the omnipresent "nigga this, nigga that," the criminal-minded macking doesn't dominate to the point of absurdity; *Da Bomb* doesn't get a "G" rating, but it's more a "PG-13" then an "R" thang, offering up juvenile braggadocio instead of Geto Boys-style carnage.

Where *Da Bomb* improves greatly on the inconsistent *Totally Krossed Out* is in Kris Kross's ever-growing microphone techniques—check out Mack Daddy's rat-a-tat-tat delivery on the title track. Still, *Da Bomb* won't radically alter your worldview—*Fear of a Black Planet* it ain't. And true to their bubblegum roots, this just wouldn't be a Kris Kross album without filler, though that only makes the peaks seem that much higher.

Kris Kross is ultimately more effective on a cassingle than over the course of a whole CD. The definitive summer slammer here is "Alright," a mid-tempo jam reminiscent of D.J. Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince's "Summertime." Over a jazzy '70s funk-style groove, Mack and Mack leave the Gats behind and revisit adolescent territory. They approximate Ice Cube's easy drawl for an innocent tale where they're "feelin' good 'cause it was the last day of school," and it's "alright when I'm rolling through my 'hood/and I see the one that used to do the dirt/that's turned good." Dancehall don Super Cat (who first guested with Kris Kross on a street-cred remix of "Jump") adds a wildly infectious chorus that energizes the song, his stuttering patois providing a percussive counterpoint to the rhythm track. Kris Kross more than hold their own against Super Cat's raw, vigorous rapping, even when Daddy Mack's voice cracks on a couple of occasions.

This youthful lapse betrays a startling vulnerability underneath the gangsta pose; more significantly, it raises questions of what will happen when Kris Kross are no longer cute kids with a gimmick. Thankfully, the strength of *Da Bomb* gives hope that, after their voices break for real, Kris Kross will be able to stand tall next to the hip hop innovators they mimic so deftly.



IN YO' FACE!

THE HISTORY OF FUNK Vols. 1-5 • *Rhino* By now, everybody knows about the holy trinity: James Brown, Sly Stone, and George Clinton were present at creation. But the subsequent history of funk remains murky and unexplored. The folks who bought or boogied to the original records—party people, dancefloor freaks, rubber fans, funkateers—tend to take this abundant musical resource for granted, while smart rap samplers and bands like the Red Hot Chili Peppers have been mining the rich motherlode for years. Ripe and lusty, the intoxicating *essence de funk* still lingers on the mainstream's edge like a delicious stench.

At long last, *In Yo' Face! The History of Funk, Vols. 1-5* presents a finger-popping, body-rocking survey—Funk 101. The series is more than a little frustrating: roughly chronological, *In Yo' Face!* grinds to a halt just as funk begins its dawn-of-the-'80s ascendancy and peak. In the end, though, all those quaking bass lines and randy vocal come-ons have a way of battering down your resistance.

Volume 1 kicks off with two essential jams, the eternal chicken-scratchin', horn-peppered riffs that nurtured an entire genre: JB's "Get Up (I Feel Like Being A)Sex Machine, Pt. 1" and Sly's "Thank You (Falletinme Be Mice Elf Agin)." Thanks to N.W.A and Rob Base, throbbing sample-sources like Charles Wright & the Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band's "Express Yourself" and "Think (About It)" by The Female Preacher Lyn Collins (both on Volume 1) ring out like former number ones instead of neglected gems.

That's the upside to Rhino's all-inclusive approach. The downside, most apparent on Volumes 2 and 3, is the presence of too many funk-inspired soul and R&B tunes. The Staple Singers, Curtis Mayfield, and the O'Jays have already been compiled and collected in depth, often by Rhino itself on other anthologies.

And isn't a total of four Average White Band songs about four too many, especially in the humiliating company of Wild Cherry's "Play That Funky Music"?!? Placed alongside the nasty-drawling Ohio Players, these pale novelties come across as clueless—at best.

Of course, the rest of the white rock mainstream largely disdained funk the first time around, dismissing it as mere disco. Volumes 4 and 5 straighten out that particular misunderstanding. From the soaring drumbeat choruses of Parliament's "Tear the Roof Off the Sucker (Give Up the Funk)" to the unforgiving hard-rock rumble of the Bar-Kays' "Shake Your Rump to the Funk," this brand of Saturday-night hedonism has little to do with the Bee Gees or Donna Summer. The fine breakthrough hits included here by the Gap Band ("Shake"), Cameo ("I Just Want To Be"), Slave ("Slide"), and Rick James ("Bustin' Out") also herald the wild times lurking just around the bend. (If Rhino follows up with Volumes 6 through 10, extending up through 1982 and Dazz Band's "Let It Whip," those sets should be absolute motherfunkers.)

Despite the inexplicable absence of "Brick House," or any pre-schmaltz Commodores for that matter, the fourth and fifth installments do conclude *In Yo' Face!* on an encouraging and forward-looking note. Matching fusion-y sax and flute solos to galactic keyboard bleats, "Dazz" by Brick prefigures Digable Planets and *Jazzmatazz* by a neat 17 years. And when the Bar-Kays' "Holy Ghost" erupts into a galvanizing, polyrhythmic drum break, '90s listeners also get a riveting peek at the birth of hip hop.

Truly, the spirit still funks among us. Even an imperfect and too-brief sampler like *In Yo' Face! The History of Funk* proves that the saga isn't over yet. ***Mark Coleman***

TONY REBEL **Tony Rebel • *Chaos/Columbia***

Don't say he didn't warn you. Before the riddim drops on Tony Rebel's first major-label album, the six-foot-four dread can be heard belting out a couple of key lines a capella-outtake-stylee: "A fresh deejay is coming/Headed for a number one/A fresh deejay is coming/Out to be a champion."

Whoever decided to lead off the LP with this studio snippet did good. Not only are the lines irrefutably accurate, but the breathy, 10-second prelude is real. We feel Rebel standing barefoot in the vocal booth, serving notice to all the false prophets and Ja-Fakin' rappers hitching a ride on the reggae bandwagon. Reggae doesn't get any realer than Tony Rebel.

To say that this is the best dancehall reggae album any major label has produced so far is not to damn with faint praise. Many dancehall veterans with stacks of Jamaican hit singles have been poorly represented on corporate wax. But *Tony Rebel* belongs on that small shelf of CDs you can listen to from beginning to end, then press repeat—right next to that Bob Marley box set.


PHOTOGRAPH BY KATRINA WESSELL

Perhaps that's because Tony Rebel is a reggae artist first and foremost, equally at home flinging style in a dancehall or chanting in a *Nyabinghi* session. Roots, culture, scripture, lyrics, sweet melodies—it's all in here, minus the usual gun talk and slackness, set to a host of riddims by most every top producer in Jamaica. When Rebel rides Donovan Germain's oft-recycled "General" riddim, the result is "One Day," a complete, uplifting song that can rock a sound-system party or send a Walkman-wearer into a spiral of life-affirming introspection.

Reggae needs Tony Rebel right now. Without hiding from reality, he manages to give a sophisticated modern interpretation of staunchly traditional Rastafarian values. After you're finished dancing to the infectiously catchy "Vibes of the Time" (whose melody is lifted from "Harper Valley P.T.A."), take a stop and check the lyrical content: "Is only Jah can really help us inna dis ya revelation time."

Then ask yourself when the last time was that an orthodox Rasta made a music video for a multi-billion-dollar company predicting the fall of Babylon. He works in mysterious ways. ***Rob Kenner***

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SINGLE FILE

by James Hunter

By the time it sneaked into this market on the *Sliver* soundtrack, **Shaggy's** "Oh Carolina" (Virgin), had already ruled U.K. charts. That figures, because this Jamaican-born Brooklynite hosts one joyous dancehall thing. Private in its obsessions, blazingly public in its gruff address, "Oh Carolina" sounds well-crafted yet also, as Shaggy has maintained, like "just a bunch of friends in the studio."...."B-b-b-but wait," **Onyx** warn in "Slam" (JMJ/RAL/CHAOS-/Columbia), "it gets worse." The group's advancing the argument that rap should rip up pavement rather than toss shindigs. It's an old position; Onyx coproducer Jam Master Jay took it 10 years ago with Run-D.M.C. But maybe these New Yorkers cast their B-boy manifesto so fiercely because, surrounded by hip hop eclecticism at home and gangsta cred out West, they think that the hard point needs to be made again. Whatever, they slam it....**Ice Cube** says not to "wreck yourself" on his "Check Yo Self" (Priority), with a remix that samples Grandmaster Flash's "The Message." It's fine, fine-sounding counsel, but **Boss** gets more absorbing results dramatizing exactly the same sentiment. Her super-intense "Deeper" (DJ West/ CHAOS/ Columbia) wields power and concern, scaring up a portrait of a woman dangerously adrift. The horror in her voice confirms that this is a fate to avoid....**The Pharcyde** deployed a Quincy Jones sample on "Passin' Me By" with crack timing and wit. Similarly, the bummed-out "Otha Fish" (Delicious Vinyl/Atlantic) borrows a Herbie Mann bit. The trick is how The Pharcyde kick in their samples with Nintendo-speed before stepping back and letting them smoke....Time was, **New Order's** "Regret" (Qwest/Warner Bros.) would have seemed the last word in Eurorhythm. And even if techno's cutting edge has passed them, the group's best moves—that quicksilver forward motion, that guitar hook lifted cold out of the mix—are no less compositionally rich and effective. Still, **Jaydee's** "Plastic Dreams" (Epic), from Belgium, is a rave instrumental to compete with Herbie Hancock's "Rockit." The Jaydee touch—earthy in the keyboard melody, unstoppable and space-bound in the wave after wave of rhythm tracks—is warm, brave. Both "Trance" and "Tribal" mixes excel....**Robin S.** and the **Captain Hollywood Project** know what time it is. Hollywood's "Only With You" (Imago) crosscuts his stairmastered Barry White raps with female choruses, sliding that combo against angular techno riffing and housey programs. Robin S. and her producers are subtler: They're following their big "Show Me Love" hit with "Love for Love" (Atlantic/Big Beat). It brings personality and addictive soul to techno's faceless pulse. Plus, Robin S. has a friendly voice that can fire right up....Fire isn't something **Terence Trent D'Arby's** ever lacked. But it's passion that occasionally turns shrill—like those background vocals on "Do You Love Me Like You Say?" (Columbia). Skip the first couple of mixes and proceed to the "12" Mix (Masters at Work)" and the "Dallas Austin Master Mix (R&B Mix)." With hip hoppy assemblage and Wonder-like R&B respectively, both nix the cheese and do superior things with D'Arby's robust vocal.... Austin's DARP SWAT Team also earn the right to mess with **Tina Turner's** "I Don't Wanna Fight" (Virgin), dubbing up this tune along the lines of Sade. For emotion, myth, singing, and mood-perfect strings, though, you can't beat the version you hear on the radio. When Turner tears up her voice at the top of the bridge, it's as involving as soulful pop music gets. This is one of the best records of her career.







BABY FACE For the Cool In You • *Epic*

It's been a couple of years since the tender-voiced Babyface put his own pipes on wax (save his cameos on the *Boomerang* soundtrack), but there probably hasn't been a two-week span when one of the songwriter/producer extraordinaire's ditties wasn't in the Top 10. Having written signature songs for Whitney Houston, Paula Abdul, Bobby Brown, Johnny Gill, Pebbles, After 7, and Karyn White and helped discover such acts as Damian Dame and Toni Braxton, the ubiquitous Babyface (along with partner L.A. Reid, the other half of the star-making L.A. and Babyface team) is clearly an architect of today's black pop scene. Credits aside, though, Face is also one of the only sensitive male R&B crooners left in the business.

Rather than riffing up a storm like his gospel-trained new jack colleagues, the subtle soul man uses his seductive falsetto, passion-over-precision phrasing, and well-timed growls to woo his listeners. *For the Cool In You,* his long-awaited, self-penned third album, is a perfect vehicle for his vocal melisma. He sounds solid on cutesy midtempos "Rock Bottom" and "Lady, Lady" (a tune spiced with Stevie-wonderful chords), but it's on the heartfelt ballads—"Never Keeping Secrets," "And Our Feelings," and the acoustic guitar-anchored "When Can I See You"—where this tenor serves up 'nuff bravura. Even when his lyrics border on cliché territory, the maestro sings with such confidence that you forgive the occasional schoolboyish hooks ("Well alright/Well OK baby/I finally done me something right/I got you in my life").

But then again, when one has infectious melodies, complex chord progressions, car-drive grooves, and bell-clear tone to offer, who needs metaphorical lyrics? Some singers, thank God, still have more than phat beats and sampled loops working in their f(l)avor. *Gordon Chambers*

DREAM WARRIORS

The Movie (Coming To A Planet Near You) • *Island*

The Dream Warriors' 1991 debut album, *And Now The Legacy Begins*, was a lesson in creative abandon. Its "Boombastic" mesh of funky breakbeats, jazzy brass, and lyrical abstraction was a fresh attempt to rescue De La's soul from hip hop's growing cult of hardness. If the results didn't always soar, the novelty of their exuberant, mystic mix kept things floating. At least for a few weeks.

Two years later, the Warriors—Toronto-bred King Lou and Capital Q—return from the "suburbs of the mind" with too much concept and too little daring. Their second album is meant to be consumed like a motion picture, each song a "visual" expression of a larger theme. Unfortunately, *The Movie* plays more like an unedited after-school TV special.

Q and Lou set out to civilize the uncivilized by prattling on about the evils of bigotry, unsafe sex, and street crime. Though their intentions are admirable and their rhyme styles competent, they end up drowning in a sea of half-baked metaphors and contorted clichés. And save for a couple of sturdy headbobbers ("Project Thing" and "I Might Freestyle"), the production fails to flesh out the few musical ideas that might have offered some relief.

All is not lost, however. Stuffing the margins of *The Movie* is poet 99, a woman whose post-Beat versifying on sex and sexual disease easily outstrips everything else on the album. 99's take-no-shit attitude, supple cadence, and resonant imagery are bold enough to offer a glimpse of the cinematic experience this record aimed to be. If only she'd been the main attraction. ***Carter Harris***

TONY TONI TONÉ

TONY TONI TONÉ Sons of Soul • *Mercury*

For Tony Toni Toné, making R&B in the '90s is a humbling proposition. The Oakland-based trio called its 1990 sophomore effort *The Revival*, and in interviews emphasized its debt to '70s soul in general and Bay Area titans Sly Stone and Larry Graham in particular. The album itself, fortunately, was anything but a nostalgia trip; following on the heels of a charming but unspectacular debut, *The Revival* suggested that the Tonys—singer/bassist Raphael Wiggins; his brother, singer/guitarist D'wayne Wiggins; and their cousin, drummer Timothy Christian Riley—had the stuff that separates those artists who synthesize their influences in fresh, exciting ways from those who merely wear them on their sleeves.

With *Sons Of Soul*, that promise is brought to fruition. Having already matched sublime vocals with slamming beats, the Tonys are now supplementing that combination(with a little help from a few collaborators) with great songwriting. Tracks like "Tell Me Mama" and "If I Had No Loot" are distinguished by sprightly sumptuous melodic hooks that offer shades of Stone and Stevie Wonder—whose lithe, sunny tenor is strongly evoked by Raphael's singing—at their breeziest. "I Couldn't Keep It To Myself" and "Gangsta Groove" are equally fine, offsetting the brisk hip hop of the previous songs with gently compelling funk grooves. Meanwhile, by contrasting a supersmooth vocal with a flurry of horns, "Tonyies! in the Wrong Key" parlays a James Brown sample into an insidious reverie.

Finally, there are three ballads, all of which outclass any such songs the Tonys have written before. After the lovely, tender come-ons of "Slow Wine" and "(Lay Your Head On My) Pillow," *Sons of Soul* climaxes, so to speak, with "Anniversary," a grandly romantic, nine-minute



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bolero that lavishes its female subject with such warmth and respect that the cheeky misogyny of an earlier track called "My Ex-Girlfriend" seems instantly forgiveable. Clearly, the Tonys can be a reverent bunch, whether serenading a lover or paying homage to the legends of soul. With its third album, the band demands no small amount of R-E-S-P-E-C-Titself. *Elysa Gardner*

EARTH, WIND & FIRE

Millennium • Warner Bros.

Meurice White's Earth, Wind & Fire and George Clinton's P-Funk amoeba remain the yin and yang of post-soul-era black music. In their heydey, both sold tons of records, but the differences were glaring; EWF encouraged listeners to savor its airy R&B like a vintage wine, while Clinton's crew just wanted to push your face in the funk. As a result, P-Funk are heroes to a generation of hardcore hip hoppers and funk rockers, while many of EWF's oldies have become Lite FM staples, likely to elicit diffidence or derision from today's new jacks.

Yet EWF cast a long shadow over current black music; their influence can be felt from Fishbone to A Tribe Called Quest, Lenny Kravitz to 24-7 Spyz. On this comeback album (the group's first recording since the lame *Heritage* in 1990), EWF leader/percussionist Maurice White, singer Philip Bailey, and most of the old crew demonstrate they still have the knack for constructing mellifluous R&B on the visionary/romantic tip.

Heavy on horns and harmony, such songs as "Love is the Greatest Story" are suave and slick as glass. Great stretches of *Millennium* may strike younger listeners—accustomed to gut-punching bass and bpm assaults—as easy-listening buppie pop. But there are two or three numbers here capable of powering some funky good times, including "Super Hero," written by and guest-starring Prince.

All 'n all, there are no real surprises here. You already know the EWF guys are masters of upbeat, razor-sharp black pop. You either go for it or you don't. Doing what they do best might not get them sampled as much as P-Funk, but, hey, that's the way of the world. ***Tom Sinclair***

"Dazzey Duks" • "Whoomp!" • "Whoot" Perhaps the most persistently revealing tradition in pop music is the novelty dance hit. And when the novelty focuses where the sun don't shine, the signifying gets really deep. So what's signified by all the shakin' goin' on during the summer of '93 with Duice's "Dazzey Duks," Tag Team's "Whoomp! (There It Is)," and 95 South's "Whoot, There It Is"? Well, of course, it's a butt thing, and I think we all understand.

Responding to the southern revival of short-short cut-offs as worn by Catherine "Daisy Duke" Bach on the early-'80s TV show *The Dukes of Hazzard*, "Dazzey Duks" was the first and most infectiously dopey of the three hits. A bleeping, high-speed throwback to the early-'80s post-"Planet Rock" craze (Jonzun Crew, Newcleus, The Micronawts, et al.), which inspired such dances as the Smurf and the Webo, "Dazzey" started its own line dance, perpetrated at country-music discos (instructional video available). Sounding like an electro-frantic cartoon of a Miami "bass" record (2 Live Crew for kids!), and jumping off from white-trash pop culture, it's perhaps the lowest common denominator crossover pop hit of all time, equal parts "Pop That Coochie" and "Achy Breaky Heart" ("Achy Breaky Coochie"?).

SINGLES OF THE MOMENT

The video—costarring Bach, *Married...With Children*'s David Faustino, *Baywatch*'s Nicole Eggert (the Catherine Bach of the '90s), and the L.A. Raiderettes—liberates a club full of white cowpokes from their boring sam-o sam-o dance rut and reaches new heights in low-budget schlock. But the song itself is relentless. "It's so incredibly dumb in the most beautiful way," enthuses Monica Lynch, president of Tommy Boy Records, which authorized Afrika Bambaataa samples for Duice ("Planet Rock") and 95 South ("Renegades of Funk").

The success of "Dazzey," "Whoomp!," and "Whoot" (all Top 20 smashes and gold sellers) indicates at least two major shifts in the hip hop and pop marketplace: (1) The Box—the Miami-based, all-request national video channel on which both "Dazzey" and "Whoot" became regulars—is a serious challenge to MTV, which played neither video; and (2) the South has risen as a major hip hop player. The two members of Duice hail from Augusta, Ga., 95 South work out of Jacksonville, Fla., and Tag Team reside in Atlanta. Add them to the transplanted southern voices of West Coast gangstas and the rural-rap of Arrested Development and suddenly nasal drawls are everywhere. Interestingly, New York was the last major market to catch on to the "Dazzey" trend.



The "Whoomp!" and "Whoot" phrases, popular shout-outs at Atlanta clubs, supplanted Naughty by Nature's "Hey! Ho!" (from "Hip Hop Hooray") as the chant of the summer. During the NBA Finals, Chicago Bulls fans cheered "Bulls! There It Is!" and a subsequent remix of the Tag Team song became a local hit. And both "Whoot" (an in-your-face free-for-all, like top-speed Trouble Funk) and "Whoomp!" (a more conventional "bass" jam) are faves among black fraternities and sororities, with the Que Dogs changing the phrase to "Woof! There It Is."

"These are the records Hammer should've made," says Lynch. "They conjure up fun in the sun, and that's what people want. The public has spoken." ***by Charles Aaron***


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THE WINANS All Out • *Quest/Warner Bros.*



There must be a God. How else could one explain the Winans? In the past decade, they have spread the good news about Jesus so well that today they *are* contemporary gospel. The only artists who come close are Be Be and Ce Ce, their younger brother and sister. But that duo still have a ways to go before they build up the outstanding repertoire Marvin, Carvin, Michael, and Ronald have. "Tomorrow," "The Question Is," "Let My People Go," "Millions," "It's Time"—classics all.

The brothers prove they are still the champs on *All Out*. Producer R. Kelly replaces Teddy Riley (who pumped up the last two Winans albums), adding a new jack kick to "Payday" and "That Extra Mile." For those who miss the group's early sound, there's "It's Not Heaven if You're Not There," a smooth R&B number featuring Lalah Hathaway, and "All You Ever Been Was Good," a foot-stompin' testimonial.

But what were the brothers thinking when they chose *All Out's* guest stars Kenny Loggins ("Love Will Never Die") and country crooner Ricky Van Shelton ("If He Doesn't Come Tonight")? Those aren't exactly singing partners the caliber of Anita Baker and Stevie Wonder, who joined the Winans on two of their best recordings, 1987's "Ain't No Need To Worry" and 1990's "Everyday the Same."

Why not tap Aretha to trade licks with Marvin on "Young, Gifted & Black," or Luther on, say, "Someday We'll All Be Free?" The right collaborators (Luther, Whitney, Mavis Staples, even—eek!—Hammer) helped make Be Be and Ce Ce's 1991 album *Different Lifestyles* the kind of masterpiece the Winans, oddly enough, have still failed to produce. Hopefully, the brothers' next effort will finally be the one that gets them all the way there. To borrow a lyric, it's time.

James Earl Hardy



ULTRAMAGNETIC MC'S

The Four Horsemen • *Wild Pitch/EMI*

For those who forgot and those who arrived late, Ultramagnetic first blew up the streets back in '88 with *Critical Beatdown*, an unrelenting sonic barrage that added tracks like "Ego Trippin' " and "Ease Back" to the hip hop canon. After bombing out last summer with *Funk Your Head Up*, a plodding mishmash of an album that only produced one memorable single ("Poppa Large"), this quirky quartet from the Bronx have emerged from the doldrums with an album that updates their signature sound while preserving their seminal flavor.

The first single, "Two Brothers With Checks (San Francisco, Harvey)," is a characteristic Ultra jam, oozing funk from a dense concoction of piano flourishes, snippets of radio-show dialogue, DJ Moe Love's turntable acrobatics, and a lumbering drum track. The group also hit the mark with "One, Two, One, Two," a sparse Kool Keith showcase that pimp-steps along over a laid-back synthesizer riff and a Cypress Hill loop.

The best cuts on *The Four Horsemen* are the work of producer Godfather Don, a Brooklyn native whose slick blend of horns, vibes, and organ breathes some space into the usually claustrophobic Ultra groove. "Raise It Up" is especially hypnotic with its buzz-inducing synth effects and energetic snare work.

The only disappointment on the album is Ced Gee's new rhyme style. He's lowered his vocal pitch several octaves and slowed his delivery to a halting, off-and-on cadence. Unfortunately, it ends up sounding like a Walkman with bad batteries. A quick comparison of "Delta Force" on the first album with the so-so remake on *The Four Horsemen* proves that Ced is all that keeps this album from rising to the ultra-high standard of Ultra's best.

Chris H. Smith

2PAC

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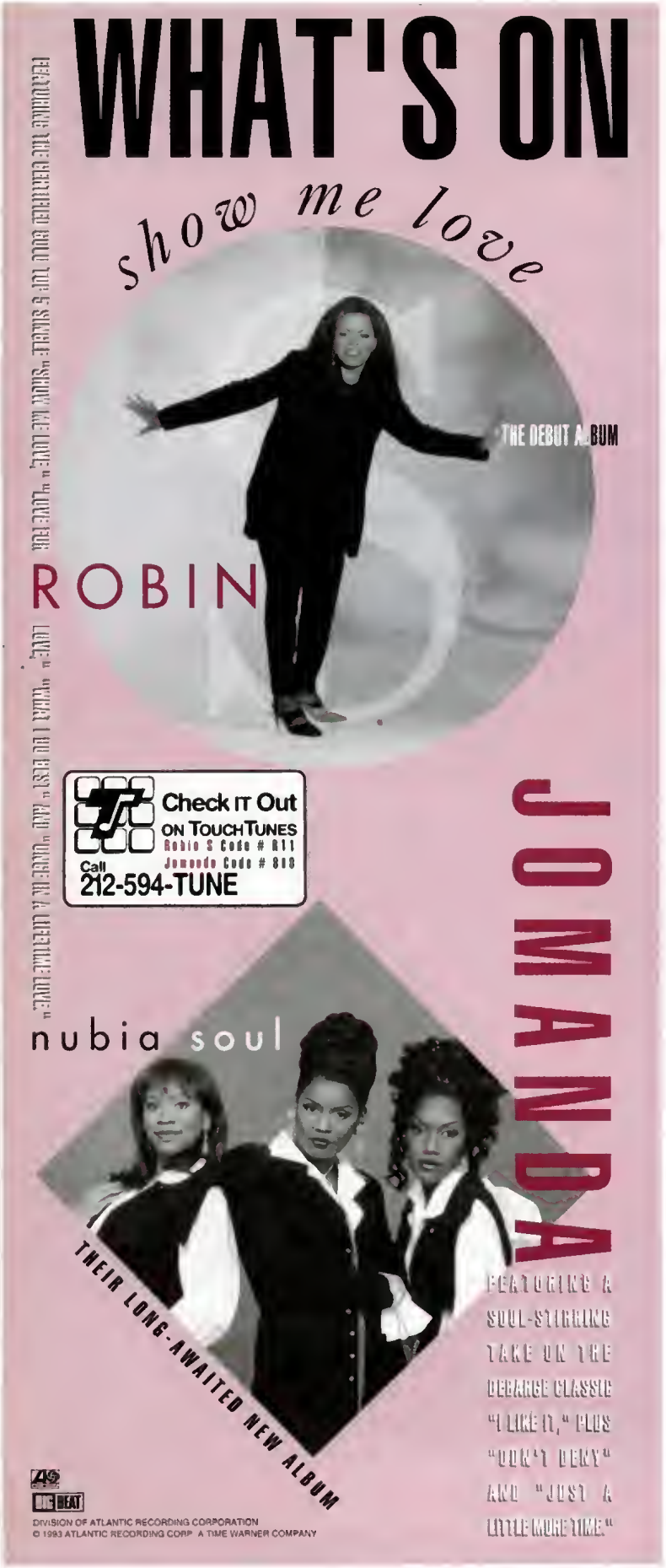


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CYPRESS HILL

Black Sunday • *Ruffhouse/Columbia*

For an art form that prides itself on innovation and "newness," hip hop has been sounding mighty predictable lately. Is it possible that so many acts that hit gold or platinum on their first go-round just can't live up to their own standard?

Add Cypress Hill's *Black Sunday* to the list of disappointing sophomore efforts. Produced by D.J. Muggs (whose sound has seemed omnipresent since the first Cypress album, thanks to his work with the likes of House of Pain and Ice Cube), *Black Sunday* again features the nasal voice of lead rapper B-Real and the restless grunts of sideman Sen Dog.



But in light of the proliferation of hardcore in the two years since their debut was released, the trio's music now sounds dated, even archaic.

B-Real and Sen Dog (who still doesn't get enough air time) spin the typical tales of ghetto dwelling—"Coming out the slums!" B-Real shrieks at the album's tip-off—and return to themes familiar from *Cypress Hill* minus that album's bite or creativity. Simple, self-explanatory songs like "I Wanna Get High" and "Cock The Hammer" represent the best moments on the album, adding a few new sounds and samples to Muggs's signature whine. Unfortunately, the rest of *Black Sunday* drowns in an uninspired collage of bass-filtered beats, leaving one to wonder if the group was taking a few too many "Hits From The Bong" (as one title has it) while laying these tracks.

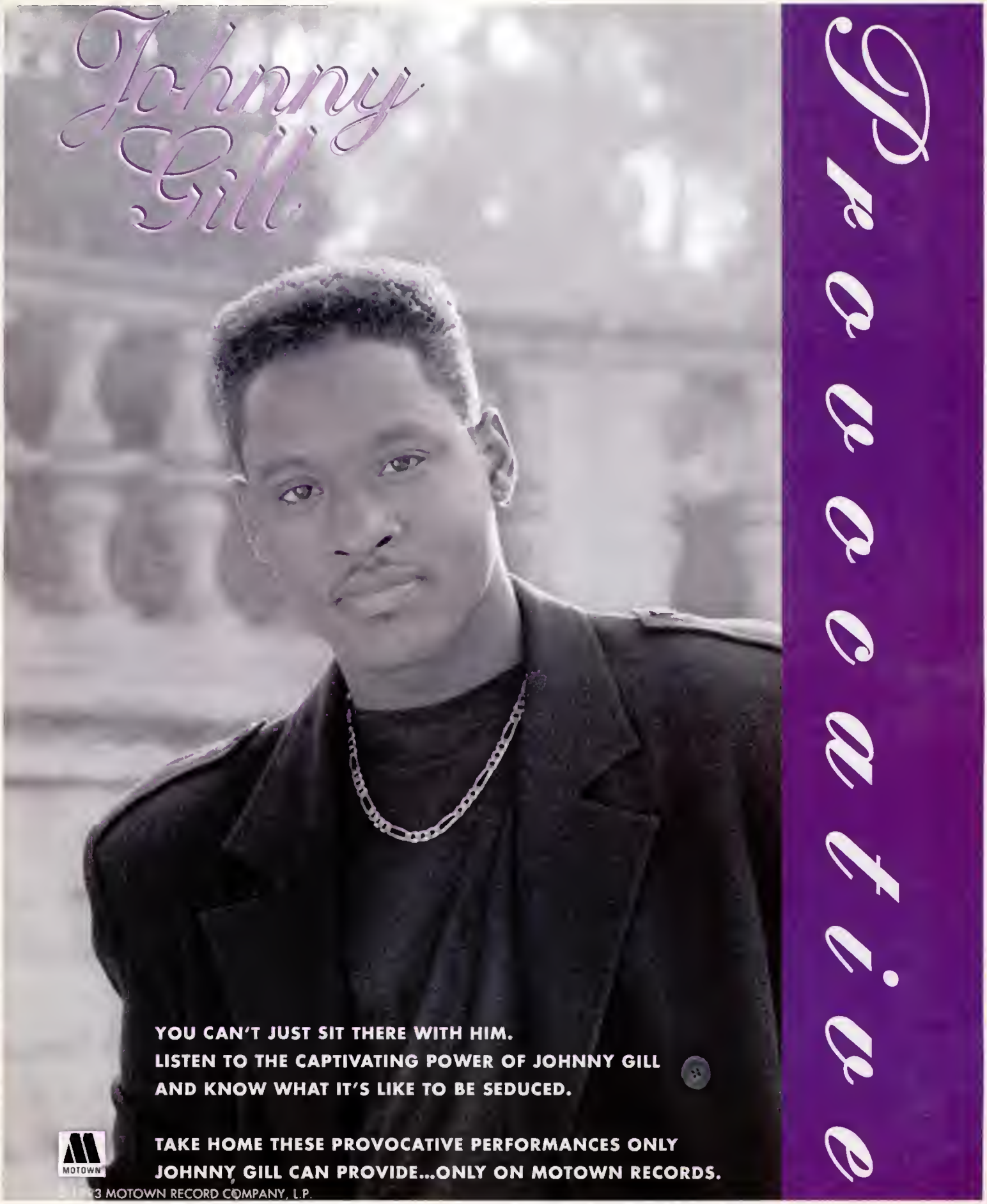
Black Sunday wouldn't be such a letdown if Cypress Hill had no talent, but these West Coast homies got skills for days. It just seems like we've heard this all before. I guess there's but so many ways a B-boy can sling a Glock, light a blunt, or grab his nuts. ***Kevin Powell***

JAMAL-SKI

Roughneck Reality • *Columbia*

For years, Jamal-Ski has been waiting in the wings at lower-Manhattan hip hop spots, eager to grab the mike and rock the crowd with his faux-Jamaican flavors. A onetime BDP associate, he follows in the footsteps of reggae-rappers KRS-One and Just-Ice. But where those pioneers added Kingston savvy to their mix like tropical seasoning, Jamal makes his reggae-rap hybrid the only item on the menu.

Jamal-Ski owes more to the London fast-chat school of ragga than he does to Jamaica's laid-back punany punsters, so on *Roughneck Reality* lightning-speed form wins out over deft turn-of-phrase substance every time. Unlike Snow, however, who looted reggae for pop texture and nothing more, Jamal's com-


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mitment runs deep. This may be the world's first Rasta-rap disc, with repeated praises to Jah, a duet with Mykal Roze featuring Roze's strongest performance since vintage Black Uhuru, and exhortations to celebrate "roots, culture, and reality."

Since this NYC rudeboy would also love to butt heads with Kingston's rudest, though, he sometimes gets wedged between his "roughneck" and his "reality." He bawls, "Me no want no 9 millimeter, me no want no Uzi," on "African Border" before feebly excusing his own Glock-spray rhetoric as a bad dream on "Terrible Man."

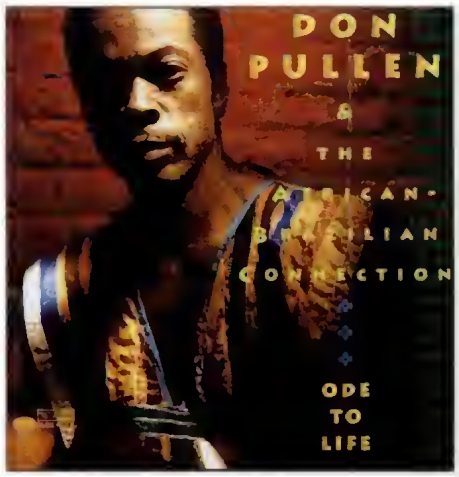
One track at a time, Jamal-Ski's debut will seep smoothly out of Jeep windows. As a disc-length endeavor, though, *Roughneck Reality*—ultimately neither a rap album nor a reggae album—fails to bring anything new to either of its cross-pollinated traditions.

Richard Nixon

DON PULLEN Ode To Life • *Blue Note*

"Pleasant" isn't a word anybody would have used to describe the pianist Don Pullen when he first started playing nearly 30 years ago. He'd whack the piano. Really thump it, using his fists to get shiny clusters ringing, drop a forearm for some chaos. He was wild.

And now he's not. Pullen's new album, *Ode To Life*, is pleasant. Now, pleasant used to be a derogatory word, but in this case it actually means something pretty good. Pullen takes his time; there's no sense of rush, or TV-style cross-cutting. He's created an album (featuring Brazilian percussion and Carlos Ward's dripping-with-ethnicity saxophone and flute) that merges a folk sensibility and jazz. Which isn't too bad an idea, considering Pullen is a master at writing simple, bright melodies.



But back to taking it easy: what really works here is that the grooves extend themselves, that the melodies stretch out, like a cat who's just waking up after a good nap. Where Pullen, during his improvisations, used to load up on the notes, piling stacks on stacks, now he just repeats a few, sidles up to the next couple, repeats them, and keeps moving—but *slowly*. And Carlos Ward's technical limitations keep him cooled out. Nothing on *Ode to Life* ever overheats; the whole thing is pure slow burn, pleasure elongated.

There's something about the quirkiness of the project that keeps it from caving in to New Age sentimentality or dopey one world-ism. Maybe it's the chord changes, influenced by gospel music but never overt with the references, or the jazz harmonies, or the percussive dissonances that occassionally amble into Pullen's playing as he goes from melody to melody. Whatever: here's something like a late afternoon in the country as the sun's going down, with the sky the most beautiful you've ever seen it. Things are fine, for a moment at least, and that isn't anything to sneer at. ***Peter Watrous***



DAVID MORALES AND THE BAD YARD CLUB

The Program • *Mercury*

In 10 years, David Morales (like Frankie Knuckles, Robert Clivillés, and David Cole before him) has evolved from D.J. to remixer to producer. Along the way, he helped create such club classics as "Do It Properly" by Two Puerto Ricans, a Black Man and a Dominican (a group that included Clivillés and Cole) and the remix of Imagination's "Instinctual," a number one dance hit.

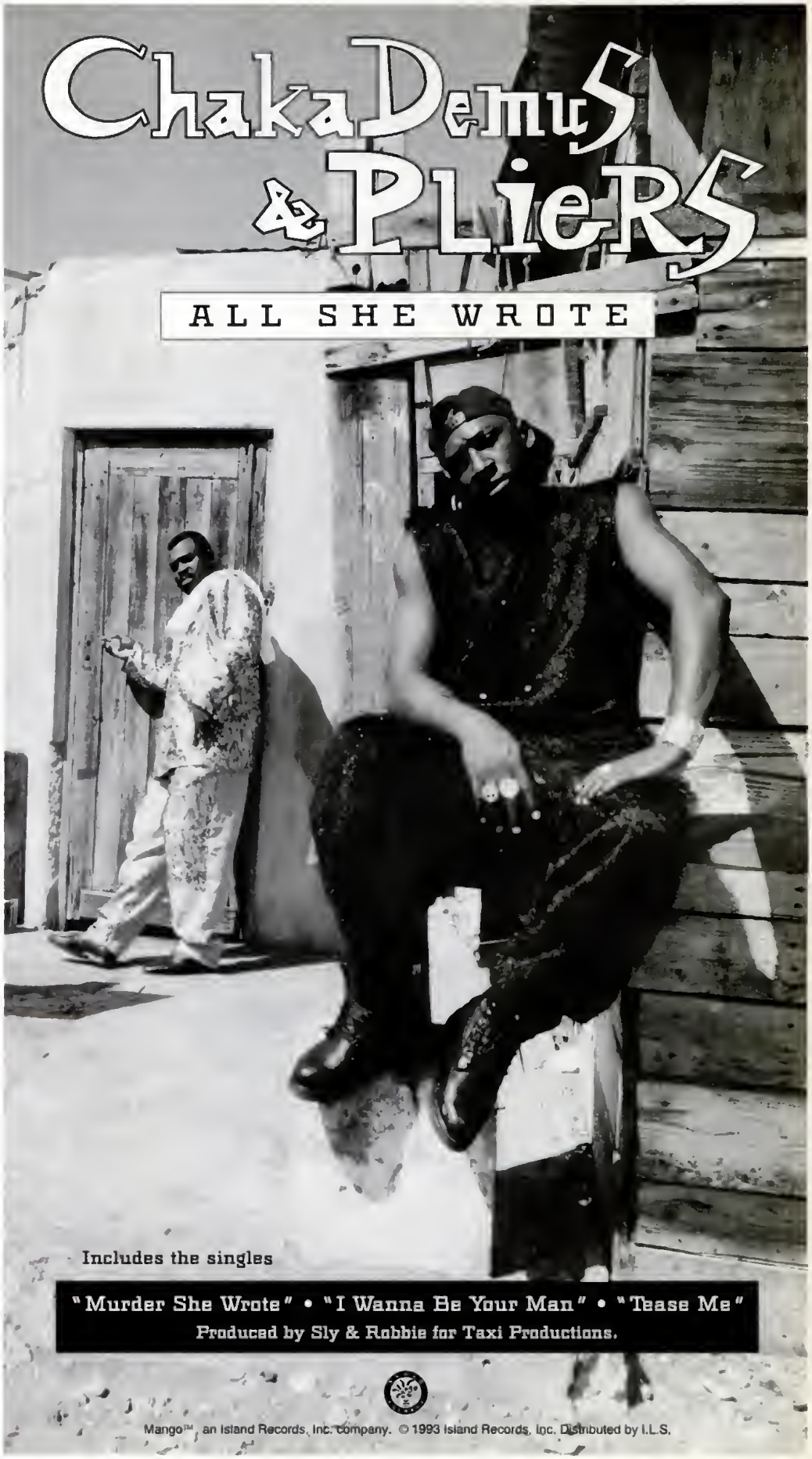
As dance continues to undergo a transition, Morales is offering yet another new direction with his latest project, the Bad Yard Club. Refuting standard dance practices, he has rounded up an eclectic cast of characters from the worlds of dance, reggae, and R&B for *The Program*—his version of Clivillés and Cole's C+C Music Factory. In the process, Morales has created a smoothed-out street sound with a wide variety of beats.

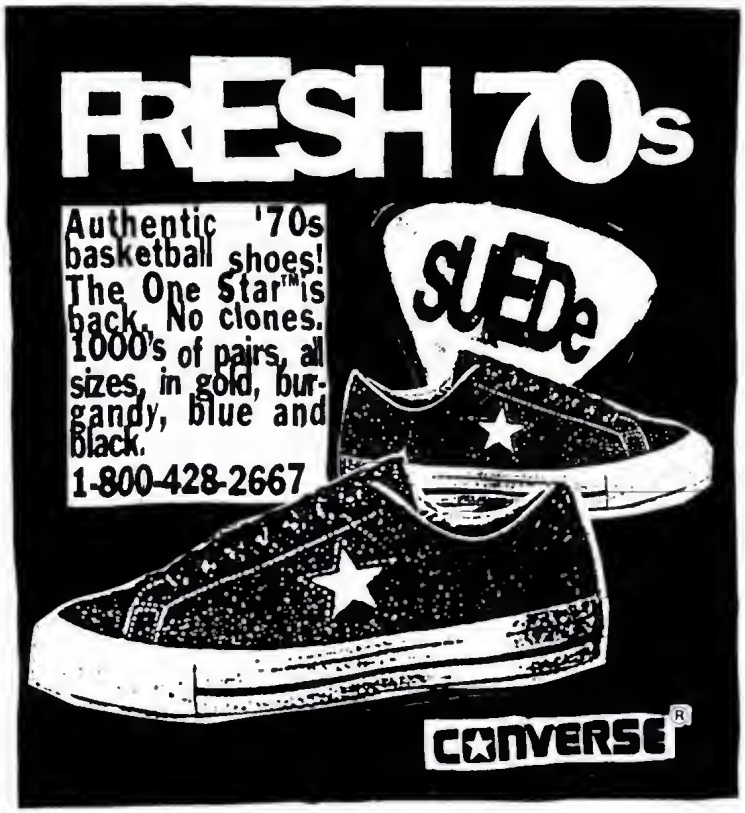
The title track asks listeners to tune in rather than tune out and "get with the program." Easily the album's most enjoyable cut, "The Program" brings together club energy with the cool running of dancehall. Deep bass lines also counter dancehall stylings on the album's first single, "Gimme Luv (Eenie Meenie Miny Mo)," a strong, danceable track with a rollback Jeep feel.



For club purists, Morales returns to his house roots with tracks like the swaying "Beautiful Thing," a deep-dish summertime groove stirred by newcomer Stanryck. "In De Ghetto," though, offers little to embrace except a redundant chorus, while Ce Ce Rogers's powerful vocals aren't enough to sustain "Games."

Morales sometimes attempts to breathe life into an outdated sound left over from the back corners of classic nightclubs. But at his best—like his celebrated reproductions of "Housecall" and "Mr. Lover Man" for Shabba Ranks or the peaks of *The Program*—Morales leads a mercurial dance community to a gulf of beats long overdue for exploration. ***Eduardo Urreta***







CASSANDRA WILSON Blue Light Till Dawn • *Blue Note*

Jazz heads think Cassandra Wilson is a jazz singer, but she's really a heavy breather, exhaling adult passion via popular song. There's nothing brassy, Sassy, or Ella in her delivery. She is to thirtysomething vocalists what Miles Davis is to trumpet players—a romancer, not a riffer; a sensualist, not a stone-cold scatter. She also thinks about singing changes the way hip hoppers think about song construction, putting rhythm ahead of melody.

Blame it on her Mississippi Delta roots or on her coming of age at the twilight of '70s soul, but Wilson approaches jazz like a good slow fuck rather than like a light-speed rocket. Her latest creation, *Blue Light Till Dawn* (which will come out on Blue Note this fall), waxes nostalgic for the days when black romance meant more than I Want A Gangsta Bitch and throws some new twists into our conception of jazz standards.

The songs (chosen by producer Craig Street) will certainly expand Wilson's audience: Joni Mitchell's "Black Crow," The Stylistics' "Children Of The Night," Van Morrison's "Tupelo Honey," Robert Johnson's "Hellhound On My Trail" and "Come In My Kitchen." It adds up to two steps forward and a long look back for Wilson.

"This album is really about telling stories," she says, "relating events and emotions. A lot of my stuff before has been so ethereal that not many stories were being told. It was more about developing a sound and a style." Wilson's other discs, excepting the standards album *Blue Skies*, have been edgy affairs showcasing her self-penned experiments with electronics and



esoteric philosophy. *Blue Light Till Dawn*, though, finds Wilson working her magic on a more mundane subject matter: human mating rituals.

"It's in that tradition," Wilson says, "of parties in darkly lit rooms where men wrestled you up against walls and grinded you to death until the break of dawn. The dances the kids do now are hip and exciting, but there's not much romance in it. It's just about dick and pussy.

"Robert Johnson sends me back into something primordial, basic man-woman energy," she continues, "but I think most jazz musicians are afraid of the blues, especially those kind of blues. It's not about technique; it's about going somewhere spiritually. And going to those places is what the art of jazz is about to me. You can't get the audience to go anywhere unless you go there."

The earth-mother of past efforts gets earthier on *BLTD*, turning "You Don't Know What Love Is" (made famous by Dinah Washington) into a narcotic lamentation as chilling as necrophilia. On the daunting Robert Johnson covers, Wilson matches the originals for tongue-in-cheek terror and lust and deepens their spell with her own brand of mojowoman witchery.

This is also the first Wilson project that matches her with a producer and accompanists who complement her musky instrument with mirth, melodicism, and sexiness. She and producer Street have made a record that recalls the steamy divas of the '50s and situates Wilson among such other archivist-interpreters as k.d. lang and Bonnie Raitt.

Blue Light Till Dawn is the kind of album that gets called timeless on the way to becoming a classic. It stirs up misty visions of jazz antiquity in thoroughly modern ways, eschewing the use of tradition as a crutch and embracing black music's past as a place where emancipation begins rather than ends.

"I always tell the musicians in my band to relax and lean backward instead of leaning forward," says Wilson. "For the most part, the music that I do requires that you not fill up space with a whole lot of notes. That way you can bend time within a song. That's what you want to do, isn't it?"



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1. To enter submit your original song with lyrics expressing your point of view about a personal relationship(s) recorded on an audio cassette. Your lyrics must also be typed or hand printed on an 8 1/2" x 11" sheet(s) of paper. On each sheet print your name, address, age and have signed by each performer (up to 4.) Entry must include a contact person with daytime and nighttime phone number. Recording must be no more than (4.) four minutes in length. Submission must be performed by the entrant and limited to 3 additional performers. Pack entry carefully and mail to: Rap or Roll Contest, P.O. Box 4393, Manhasset, NY 11030 returned. Material contained within the cassette remains the property of the sponsor, none will be be judged under the supervision of Marden Kane, Inc. on or before 11/15/93. Based on: Content 60%, Originality 30%, Clarity 10%. Four (4.) finalists (individual or group) two from east and two from west of the Mississippi River will be awarded a 2 days/1 night trip to New York City. Travel allowance of up to $2,500 will be provided to each finalists (individual or group). Finalists 17 years of age or younger (group members or individual) must provide one chaperon, parent/guardian. (See complete rules for details) Finalists are required to perform their entry (song/lyrics). One grand prize winner will be selected based on criteria in Rule #2 and receive $500 cash. Each of the three (3) runner-up finalists (individual or group) receive $500 cash. **2.** Entries must be received by 11/8/93. Entries become the property of the entrant and limited to 3

3. Open to residents of the U.S. ages 12-25 (at time of entry) except professional song/lyric writers, employees and the immediate families of Chesebrough-Pond's USA Co., its subsidiaries, affiliates, and agencies. Void where prohibited. Federal, State, and local laws apply. Taxes are the sole responsibility of the winners.

4. For a list of winners available after 1/15/94, send a self addressed stamped envelope to Close-Up Winners C/o Cairns and Associates, 641 Lexington Ave. New York, NY 10022-4503. Residents of WA and VT need not include return postage. For a complete set of rules send a self addressed stamped envelope to: Rap or Roll Rules C/o Cairns and Associates, 641 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10022-4503. All other published rules and conditions apply.

Call 1-800-RAP-O-ROLL for complete contest rules and regulations.

RIFFS, RAP & BUTTS

BY MORALES & BAKER

"The Rev. Dr. Calvin Butts, senior minister at the Abyssinian Baptist Church, will get behind the wheels of a steamroller to smash tapes and CDs on Saturday, June 5 at 11:15 a.m. outside [the] Abyssinian as part of his protest against vulgar and negative lyrics and the music industry executives responsible for producing, promoting and glamourizing them."–Church Press Release



REALITY: PERCEPTION:

The Lord giveth–

–And the Lord taketh away.



But that Saturday the Lord didn't fill the Abyssinian with much more than its usual Harlem congregation and the usual sour news media–despite a month's worth of local and national news coverage.

Three young adults spoke first to illustrate that the Rev. Butts's concerns were happening – one of them was Tanyette Dewese.



I am angry, I am hurt; I feel disrespected, degraded and humiliated. As a black woman raised in the community of Harlem, and a sister of a rapper, Kool Moe Dee, I am disturbed to witness and hear that the majority of our black male rappers can only identify the black woman as a whore, a female dog, or just simply someone to have sex with!

Then the Rev. Butts – inexplicably introduced as someone "who would risk his life to stand up against decadent lyrics, music that destroys the moral fiber of our community"– made his appearance.



The Reverend had four T-shirts on display, purchased in the neighborhood, he used as visual metaphors for the alleged lowbrow, evil application of rap.

One was a Makin' Bacon shirt which has been a headshop staple since the early '70s– and has nothing to do with the black experience; two bore intentionally offensive quotes from Dr. Dre; the last was a Coppertone ad parody labeled Baby Got Back.

Butts went on to make what he thought were cogent and timely points–



–then he seemed almost apologetic when it came to his main event, as if he suddenly understood its lack of dignity.



And so we filed onto 138th St. on a drizzly early afternoon, expecting the Reverend to climb something out of The Flintstones. Instead–



The Abyssinian crowd was met by a group of protesting rappers led by Preacher Earl, who handed out his ten-point plan "for the salvation of inner-city youth" – and copies of his new album.

Both groups crowded around the steamroller, making any movement or clear photo op impossible. The Reverend tried to put the best face on things–



In order to move this bulldozer, they would have to confront our own brothers and sisters. We will not do that. Our point has been made, that we are against the negative lyrics–

No justice, no peace!



So the event never came off, whatever you've heard. Later, the Rev. Butts and his congregation found some other way to damage the two dozen rap tapes and CDs they'd amassed, and went downtown to present the carnage to executives at Sony Records – forgetting, apparently, that it was Saturday, and that the Lord and the Devil keep different hours.



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DETAILS

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Byron Lars available at Bergdorf Goodman, 754 Fifth Ave., NYC; Saks Fifth Ave., 611 Fifth Ave., NYC; Macy's select stores.

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Peter Fox boots $395, 105 Thompson St., NYC. DKNY tights, stockings $10.50, at better department stores.

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Fernando Sanchez leggings by special order: 212-989-9166. On bear, boots $110 by Na Na (NYC/Santa Monica/ San Francisco). For stores, please call 800-347-4728.

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Fernando Sanchez bodysuit, leggings, by special order; Hot Sox tights $10.50, at better department stores.

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Vintage jacket $150, pants $35 at Screaming Mimi's, 22 East 4th St., NYC; GAP turtleneck $16.50, available at all GAP stores nationwide. Alain Mikli shades from $75 to $250, Alain Mikli, 100 Fifth Ave., NYC; Optical Shop of Aspen, select stores. The Family Jewels Vintage Clothing hat $35, 832 Sixth Ave., NYC; Na Na shoes $112.

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Jockey International, Inc. tank $5.50 each/3-pack $14.50, at department and specialty stores. Jasper Conran pants $375, Barneys New York, 17th St. at Seventh Ave., 660 Madison Ave., NYC; Fred Siegel, L.A.; Nan Duskin, Phila. The Family Jewels suspenders $9, hat $32. Product by Elaine Kim Gabriel & Kramer jacket $275, turtleneck $110, Big Drop, 174 Spring St., NYC; Traffic, L.A.; 1F Boutique, 474 West B'way, NYC. Artichoke Design cap $55, Barneys New York; Roppongi, L.A.. b. moody pants $420, Barneys New York; Fred Siegel, L.A.; Nan Duskin, Phila. Can Vees by Woolworth's, available at Woolworth's nationwide. Paul Smith suit $1,390, polo $250, Paul Smith, 108 Fifth Ave., NYC.

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b. moody dress $670, Macy's select stores; Nan Duskin, Phila.; H. Lorenzo, L.A. Erickson Beamon Showroom Seven necklace $145, Bergdorf Goodman, NYC; Neiman Marcus, L.A. Flyte Ostell scarf $264, Barneys New York; Dayton Hudson, Chicago; Neiman Marcus, L.A. CD Greene dress $890, Jimmy's, 1226 Kings H'way, Brooklyn, NY; I. Magnin, S.F., CA. Screaming Mimi's bracelet $25.

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Dolce & Gabbana suit $1,550, turtleneck $285, Bagutta, 402 West B'way, NYC; Theodore, Beverly Hills. The Family Jewels shirt $15. Jockey International, Inc. tank. Alain Mikli glasses *(top)* from $185 to $195, shades *(bottom)* from $75 to $200. Callaghan coat $1,210, Dayton Hudson, Minneapolis; Marshall Fields, Chicago. Callaghan jacket $1,200, pants $445, Shauna Stein, L.A.; Alan Bilzerian, Boston. Flyte Ostell dress $868, Bergdorf Goodman, NYC; Dayton Hudson, Chicago; Neiman Marcus, L.A. Jasper Conran suit $1,150, vest $185, Barneys New York. Moschino shirt $175, Saks Fifth Ave., NYC; Charivari, 18 W. 57 St., NYC.

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Emporio Armani coat $540, Emporio Armani, 110 Fifth Ave., NYC; also Boston/Beverly Hills/San Francisco/ Honolulu/Costa Mesa. Club Room shirt $27.50, Macy's select stores. Romeo Gigli tie $95, Spazio Romeo Gigli, 21 E. 69 St., NYC. Alain Mikli glasses from $185 to $195.

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b. moody dress $595, Barneys New York; Fred Siegel, L.A.; Macy's select stores; Nan Duskin, Phila.

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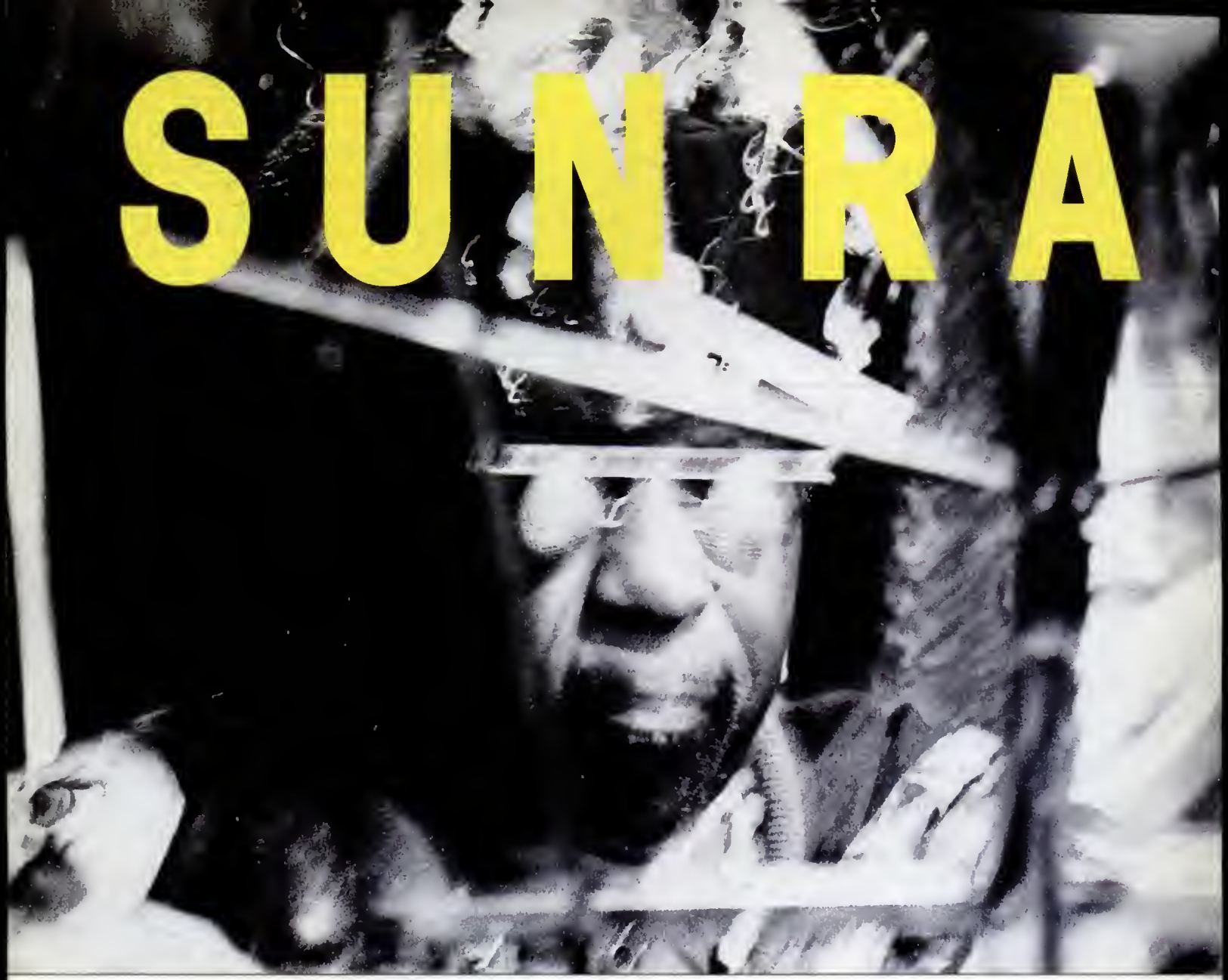
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SUN RA



PROPS

by John F. Szwed

Sun Ra (born Herman Poole Blount, May 22, 1914), who died on May 30, 1993, was the most bizarre musician of a century studded with the outrageous. Sonny's music—which he felt was capable of realigning human morality, or the rotation of the planets—was only part of his arts arsenal: he also published poetry (*The Immeasurable Equation*), painted his album covers, and made films (*Space Is the Place*, now available on video). And all of his works served his Cosmos-centric philosophy.

After years as a rehearsal pianist for nightclub reviews and in blues and swing bands such as Wynonie Harris's and Fletcher Henderson's, he set off in the 1950s to find a way to communicate his ideas about space, black people, and spiritual matters. He found it in the creation of his Arkestra. At a time when bands wore suits, his wore pharaohs' robes with outer-space accessories. He animated his bandstand, first with wind-up space toys, then light shows, organs that played in color, rear-projected films, exotic dancers, gilded musclemen, and fire-eaters, all this long before hippie light shows and performance artists' "happenings." To turn the Arkestra into a high-tech sonic showpiece, he installed electric instruments as fast as they were invented, and was the first to use the electric bass, electric piano, and synthesizer.

In the '70s, when big bands were supposed to be dead, Sun Ra's was thriving. A typical performance started in total darkness, a half-dozen drummers hatching rhythms that introduced layer after layer of horns sighing, humming, and howling; for five or six hours dancers swirled huge silks or carried masks through smoke, while saxophonists battled, leaping and rolling on the floor. Throughout, Sun Ra sang and rapped, or thrashed the keyboards surrounding him with fists, forearms, and butt. The Arkestra moved through the audience, touching them, inviting them to dance, and at the end of the evening marching out with them. "I want to show them," Sun Ra said, "how easy it is to just leave this existence behind."

Audiences may seldom have been clear as to what Ra's spectacles were about, but he was demonstrating that music could contain serious drama, comedy, and passion. He also reveled in improvisation, noise, and wholesome weirdness. His mystical message affected many, including free-jazz players John Coltrane, Pharoah Sanders, and Anthony Braxton; writers Amiri Baraka and Henry Dumas; artists Ed Love and David Hammons. His performance and musical innovations have also influenced pop stars such as Fela Kuti; Earth, Wind & Fire; and Public Enemy. In referring to the bandleader, George Clinton once commented, "Sun Ra is definitely out to lunch. In fact, we eat at the same restaurant." —*John F. Szwed is the author of a forthcoming biography on Sun Ra.*

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